

**Gerald Sorin**

**Academic boycott: free speech or sordid vilification of Israel?**

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*The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement is increasing its grip on U.S. campuses, especially in post-secondary education. A definitive new anthology sees it as outright discrimination.*

*"The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel,"* edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, MLA Members for Scholars' Rights, 549 pages, \$34.99

All states commit crimes, but only one state is pronounced immoral and fatally flawed. And only that one – the whole world over – is subject to cultural and academic boycotts: Israel. A case against an academic boycott of Israel might seem so easy to make that we'd hardly need more than a paragraph or two in which to do it. So why publish a 550-page book, including 25 essays by leading scholars and journalists, accompanied by 30 pages of documents? A good question without an obvious answer, until we discover in this impressive anthology that the American Studies Association (ASA) is not the only academic organization to have recently passed resolutions supporting the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS).

Preceded by several historically misleading and morally suspect paragraphs beginning with "Whereas," the BDS resolutions passed by the ASA, the Association for Asian-American Studies, and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (The Modern Language Association defeated a resolution, but sadly not without a battle) call on Israel to withdraw to its 1967 borders, end its occupation and "colonization" of all Arab lands, and respect the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties, as stipulated in United Nations Resolution 194.

Nowhere in its literature or discussion does BDS make mention of the fact that 194 goes back to 1948, and was conditional on the Arabs/Palestinians' agreement to live in peace with its neighbors. Nor is there any indication that the resolution was vetoed by all the Arab states party to the 1948 conflict.

Moreover, as Emily Budick (“When a Boycott is not ‘Moral Action’...”) argues in agreement with more than a dozen other contributing writers to “The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel,” the implementation of Resolution 194 would be nothing less than the dissolution of the State of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people. It would also involve the deconstruction of a fully constituted nation that was established by an international vote in the UN and where 8 million people – including almost 1.7 million Israeli Arabs – now reside.

Many essays in this volume – substantial, well-reasoned and scholarly – suggest the BDS resolutions will fail (even if more may be coming) in so far as they will not stop U.S. universities and academic associations in any significant number from interacting with Israeli scholars and institutions of higher education. Also, there is no chance at all that boycotts by themselves, whatever their number, will move Israel to withdraw from the territories or to agree to the unqualified “right of return” for Palestinian refugees and their descendants. No people living within the borders of a sovereign state would surrender its national identity without massive resistance. And who would coerce the Israelis to do so – the UN, NATO, the European Union or the United States? And with what – an embargo enforced by a flotilla of mighty naval vessels?

### **‘Something always sticks’**

While the resolutions have no teeth, they certainly have repercussions and it would be wrong to ignore them. In their brilliantly constructed essay “When Failure Succeeds...,” professors Samuel and Carol Edelman show explicitly what several other essays strongly imply: BDS arguments made by a committed, persistent and aggressively vocal minority, employing what Sabah Salih (“Islam, BDS, and the West”) calls the “tyranny of unverifiable claims,” can create in the minds of many a context for the delegitimization and demonization of Israel.

The Edelmanns point to Julius Streicher, the master of anti-Semitic invective and propaganda in prewar Germany, who said, even as he lost all the libel

cases brought against him, “Something always sticks.” According to the Edelmans, who cite credible test results, this mudslinging tactic is most effective among “at-risk” groups such as young men and women pursuing post-secondary education.

The BDS Movement’s call for academic boycotts is especially dangerous because it directly impacts students and scholars on college campuses. Indeed, a new combined study from the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law and Trinity College found that anti-Semitism is on the rise in U.S. institutions of higher education. It is hard to imagine this has nothing to do with the fact that a large number of teachers who attended meetings of their professional organizations in 2013 voted there for resolutions that included some variation of the following: “Whereas there is no substantive academic freedom for Palestinian students and scholars under Israeli occupation, and Israeli institutions of higher learning are a party to Israeli state policies that violate human rights and negatively impact the working conditions of Palestinian scholars and students, [the association] endorses and will honor the call of ‘Palestinian civil society’ for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.”

If you are scratching your head about the promotion of an academic boycott to end an academic boycott, you will want to read philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s supremely logical piece, “Against Academic Boycotts,” in which she distinguishes boycotts that are never defensible within the academy from: censure; organized public condemnation; helping the harmed; and vigilance on behalf of the truth – all of which are more ethical and efficacious than what amount to “blacklists.”

You will learn much, too, about how little the BDS Movement knows about the realities of academic freedom in Israel from Ilan Troen’s essays “The Campaign to Boycott Israeli Universities” and “The Israeli-Palestinian Relationship in Higher Education.” In both pieces, the Israeli professor astutely examines historical and ideological sources relevant to boycotts, as well as evidence gathered from his experience in the field. These contributions, along with the nuanced essays by other Israeli academics teaching in mixed Arab-Israeli classrooms, demonstrate, in contradistinction to BDS resolutions, that there is substantial academic freedom for students and scholars – resident and visiting – who teach, lecture or participate in seminars and workshops in the West Bank and in Israel proper.

Valuable material supporting Troen’s arguments can be found in the documents at the end of the book, including a statement by Palestinian Prof. Sari Nusseibeh, who in 2006, as president of Al-Quds University, correctly noted, “If we look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we’ve had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come out in favor of seeing [Palestinians and Israelis] as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”

One begins to wonder what the academic boycott movement is really all about. The answers advanced here are varied and sometimes in disagreement; but almost all contributors see BDS as a deeply sordid attempt to vilify the Jewish state.

### **The hijacked left**

Most of the presentations in “The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel” concentrate on the current situation in U.S. post-secondary education, including its ancillary academic associations – arenas populated by a disproportionate number of left-leaning professors. And as Baruch College’s Prof. Mitchell Cohen complains in “Anti-Semitism and the Left that Never Learns,” the designation “left” has been “hijacked” by those who disingenuously self-exonerate by insisting that they are anti-Zionist but not anti-Semitic.



Omar Barghouti: studies at Tel Aviv University while advocating an academic boycott of Israel. Screenshot from YouTube

One can, of course, make this theoretical distinction, but it is hard to credit coming from those who insinuate that Israel is an “alien implant,” remonstrate against the enormous political and economic power of “the Jewish Lobby,” and blame “Zionists” for an astonishingly long and apparently endless list of dastardly deeds. At the same time, these members of what they call the “global progressive left” believe there is nothing that Hamas – whose 1988 charter calls for the extinction of Israel – can do that can’t be blamed “in the final analysis” on Israel.

The hijacked left is led intellectually by Omar Barghouti, a founding member of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, who opts for a “one-state solution” or two states, each with a Palestinian majority made up in the main of returning refugees. What happens to the inevitable Jewish-Israeli minority seems to be none of his concern.

Barghouti is described persuasively in several essays as someone who castigates, but completely fails to understand academic freedom. He sees it only as part of a “liberal hegemony” that constrains the moral obligations of scholars to respond to situations of serious violations of human rights. For him, academic freedom is merely a cultural fetish, one to be casually disregarded when necessary to achieve social justice. Ironically, even as Barghouti campaigns actively for a worldwide academic boycott of Israel, he is studying at Tel Aviv University in pursuit of a PhD. In response to a petition urging his expulsion, signed by 184,000 people, the university, citing the principle of academic freedom, refused to act against Barghouti.

Another outspoken advocate and intellectual guru for the pro-academic boycott movement is Judith Butler, currently a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and a member of the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace. In perhaps the most important essay in the book, Cary Nelson deconstructs what he calls Butler’s “idealist fantasy of historical possibility.” Butler seems to believe that Jewish Israelis would willingly give up their right to national self-expression in order to effectuate a nonviolent political solution to the festering, century-old problem of Jewish-Arab relations.



Judith Butler, a leading advocate of the academic boycott of Israel. Photo by Wikimedia Commons

Not only is this magical thinking, it is also a recipe for the endless and uninterrupted violence Butler claims to be against. Neither Palestinians nor Jewish Israelis will relinquish their nationalism without a fight. Moreover, though she says she has been quoted “out of context,” Butler has described violence-prone Hamas and Hezbollah as “social movements that are progressive” and “part of the global left.”

In other slippery pronouncements, as Russell Berman shows in “The Boycott as an Infringement on Academic Culture,” Butler – in order to “prove” she is not against academic freedom – makes an egregiously false distinction between boycotting educational institutions, which is legitimate in her eyes, and boycotting individual scholars, which is not. Since professors and researchers necessarily depend on their institutions for funding, there is no distinction of the type Butler claims.

### **Is winning the goal?**

As other essays, as well as pro-BDS books, anthologies and websites mentioned in this volume make clear, the goal of the academic boycott is not necessarily to “win” or get Israel to pull out of the West Bank, or even to protect the rights of Palestinians. It is, as Thomas Abowd – BDS supporter and professor at Tufts University – puts it in a 2014 essay, to reject Israel’s “ongoing 65-year theft of Palestinian land.” The strongly implied and often explicit message is that BDS wants to bolster the irresponsible and dangerous narrative that, since at least as early as 1948, Israel has been stealing all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and that the Jewish state is a malevolent country with no standing and no right to

be treated equally in the world of nation-states. This sounds like classic anti-Semitism.

Perhaps “The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel” won’t help those defending an anti-boycott stance in the face of professors and students critical of Israel who shout slogans and rely on distorted history. However, the book is essential for those who want to understand in some detail why an academic boycott of Israel is outright discrimination, and why it threatens not only Israeli professors and scholars, but the very reason for universities and the idea of free speech itself.

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