Should we consider a boycott of Israeli academic institutions?

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YES The proposal by the University and Colleges Union congress to discuss whether it should boycott Israeli academic institutions has caused a furore. The House of Lords set aside time for a debate, and the UK government dispatched a minister to reassure its Israeli counterparts. Full page advertisements appeared in newspapers condemning the decision. The great and the good were mobilised. Irrational, one sided, anti-semitic, and counterproductive were some of the accusations levelled against us for deciding to debate.

As the motion's mover, I have been subjected to sustained vilification. Supporters of Israel have threatened to destroy the careers of any union members who support a boycott. The conflation of a boycott proposal and a proposal to debate the appropriateness of a boycott serves the purpose of those who wish to deflect attention from the key issue: the plight of people suffering under occupation.

So why has the union brought this condemnation down on its head? Delegates decided that we could not ignore what is being done in the Occupied Territories, or the denial of educational opportunities and academic freedom to Palestinian students and scholars. Some BMA members have also expressed concern about the complicity of the Israeli Medical Association in the occupation.¹

The territories, occupied since 1967, have been colonised by Israeli settlements built on illegally confiscated land. The area has been disaggregated and rendered ungovernable by road networks for Israeli use only. Houses are demolished as collective punishments. Farmers are separated from their land, and the supply of water discriminates between the needs of Palestinians and those of Israeli settlers.

In these circumstances, there can be no normal educational provision. Tutors and students face delays and harassment at checkpoints, visa and travel restrictions, and problems of infrastructural decay and underfunding. Work for most inhabitants is all but non-existent, and 46% of the population is suffering from or vulnerable to food insecurity.²

In all of this, there is strong evidence of the complicity of Israeli academic institutions.³

No Israeli college or university has publicly condemned what is being done in the name of every Israeli citizen. Some Israeli educational institutions have established campuses for settlers on illegally confiscated land; others conduct archaeological digs on land from which Palestinian farmers have been expelled.

Some Israeli colleagues have spoken out against the occupation. But these are the heroic few—they risk their careers.

Our boycott debate is accused of infringing academic freedom. It does so, and that is to be regretted. The pursuit of scientific and artistic advance without hindrance is indeed crucial for human improvement. But academic freedom

is not an absolute value taking precedence over all else. The values of human life and dignity are the ultimate objectives, and sometimes these may not be entirely compatible with untrammelled academic freedom.

We are also accused of interfering with free speech. But it is our opponents who are trying to prevent such a debate from taking place.

Unfair to Israel?

We are accused of singling out Israel—the Jewish state—and of being anti-semites. We are asked why we do not propose a boycott of other states whose policies are barbaric, such as China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Zimbabwe.

But whether a boycott is appropriate in such places depends on the merits of each individual case. In the case of Israel, we are speaking about a society whose dominant self image is one of a bastion of civilisation in a sea of medieval reaction. And we are speaking of a culture, both in Israel and in the long history of the Jewish diaspora, in which education and scholarship are held in high regard. That is why an academic boycott might have a desirable political effect in Israel, an effect that might not be expected elsewhere.

Anti-semitism?

The accusation of anti-semitism is absurd and offensive. Accusing those who criticise Israel of being anti-semites presumes an identity of interests between Israel and all Jewish people. This is contrary to the facts. Most people who spoke in favour of the motion at our congress are Jewish, as are the members of the British

Committee for the Universities of Palestine. The response of Israel's defenders is to say that such people are not proper Jews—that they are “self-hating Jews.” Jewishness thus is transformed from a cultural or religious identity into an ideological position.

The result of the debate may not be a decision to boycott. If that is so, it will not be because most members are unconcerned about the plight of the Palestinians. It would be because an alternative proposal for their aid and support, and for opposing the policies of the Israeli state, had emerged.

The boycott would be of Israeli academic institutions only. We would not sever links with Israeli colleagues. This would be counterproductive. Individual and group collaboration on joint projects could continue, as long as such projects were not formally sponsored by Israeli institutions.

The fundamental issue is how to raise the current outrages to national and international prominence. Whether an institutional boycott is the most appropriate tactic will remain an open question. What is not, and cannot be, open is whether it is appropriate to debate and discuss the pros and cons of the tactic.

If Israeli academic institutions are complicit in the inhuman treatment of the Palestinians, doing nothing would also make us complicit, if only by default. We cannot turn away and say, “Business as usual.”

Competing interests: None declared.

Hadassah Hospital and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem

Tony Blair's appointment as Middle East peace envoy is intended to invigorate the peace process. **Tom Hickey** thinks boycotting universities might encourage the Israeli government to reach a settlement, but **Michael Baum** believes collaboration is a more effective way forward

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NO First of all I should declare a conflict of interest. I am a Jew and a Zionist. I consider myself a secular Jew who abhors the fanaticism among West Bank settlers. I support a two state solution. The Palestinians must have self determination; 60 years of statelessness after the British mandate is enough. This position is held by all my Israeli academic friends and colleagues. These academics are the very constituency the boycotters are targeting and are disproportionately represented in the peace camp. How can alienating this group enhance the peace process?

The Israeli universities and research institutes are no more agents of Israel than Oxford or Cambridge are of the United Kingdom. And they are not responsible for repression of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories—a policy which is universally unpopular. Furthermore, it is nonsense to suggest that you can target the institution without damaging the individual.

Multicultural society

Let me also dismiss the big lie that Israel is an apartheid state. Israel is a multicultural mosaic with Jews, Muslims, Christians, and other faiths. Druze, Bahá'í, and Armenian Christians chose to live there after persecution in Muslim countries. Only malign commentators can be blind to the Arabs who form 20% of Israeli citizens. They are free to vote

and express their views (including the right to campaign against the state itself) and serve in the cabinet. Arab judges hold high office and newspapers argue the Palestinian cause.

My first hand experience of Israel started as a young surgeon in 1963-4. I worked in northern Israel in a hospital serving Arab villages, kibbutzim, new immigrant townships, and ancient communities of Arabs and Jews in Nazareth, Afula, and Tiberias. A fifth of the doctors and nurses were Arabs, trained at the expense of the Israeli government. Arab and Jewish patients were treated with the same respect in adjacent beds. This is still true in all Israeli hospitals. It is also a lie to suggest that the Israel Medical Association is complicit in the ill treatment of prisoners.¹

I would go even further and state that Israel provides more academic freedom for Arab scholars than anywhere else in the Middle East. There are numerous examples of Palestinian and Israeli collaborations. For example, the Israel Cancer Association funds initiatives that benefit both Israeli and Palestinian patients and their families. These include the Breast Care Centre at the Holy Family Hospital in Nazareth, which holds joint sessions with Israeli Jewish and Arab women and Palestinians who share common experience as survivors of breast cancer. Hadasah Hospital and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem provide outreach programmes for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Poor children from the territory get free, state of the art treatment, often supported by the Peres Foundation. Ben Gurion University of the Negev has launched the joint Israel-Jordan-Palestine project for improvement of motor skills in children with cerebral palsy and also funds the work of Ohad Birk (Israeli Jewish), Izzedelin Abuelaish (Gaza Palestinian), and Khalil Elbedour (Israeli Bedouin), who have unravelled rare genetic disorders among Negev Bedouin.

Universities must encourage a spirit of inquiry, where members join in dialogue, with freedom of expression, learning from each other's narratives. As Malcolm Grant, provost of University College London, put it: the boycott "betrays a misunderstanding of the

academic mission which is founded squarely on academic freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech" Lord Adonis went further in the House of Lords:

"Not only would a boycott be inconsistent with the spirit of openness and tolerance that should inform public life. It would also be counter-productive. Education plays a vital role in developing

and aiding understanding between different people. It is therefore all the more important to keep open channels of communication with academic and educational institutions in the Middle East during these difficult times."²

Finally, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that this call for a boycott damages the reputation of British academia in the eyes of the wider world.³

Balance and cooperation

There are two narratives concerning the tragic history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both have verity, yet they are recounted as if one had the monopoly of truth. To accept one side only and delegitimise Israel shows either ignorance or malice. For a balanced account I commend *City of Oranges*, which tries to look at the history of Jaffa, a microcosm of the wider conflict, from both sides.⁴

Instead of boycott, might I suggest a more constructive approach, emulating my late brother, David? David died eight years ago while president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. His last act was to establish a sick children's clinic in Gaza. His family continue this legacy through the David Baum International Foundation at the college. I believe passionately that we can all do our bit for peace by building bridges between British, Israeli, and Palestinian academics and physicians. Through this collaboration and dialogue the health and welfare of all will improve, leading to increasing mutual respect and trust; sowing seeds for a peaceful solution ahead of any "road map."

Competing interests: As stated at the start of this article.

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