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## Israel, Europe and the academic boycott

HILARY ROSE and STEVEN ROSE

*Abstract:* From competing in the Eurovision song contest to participating in the European Research Area, Israel is beneficially treated as a European nation. Yet its violations of international law against the Palestinians, attested in UN resolutions and in contravention of Europe's own humanitarian conventions, attract no international sanctions. The academic boycott of Israel, following the wide-ranging boycott of South Africa that helped to publicise and end the iniquities of apartheid, aims to focus attention on issues of human rights, in the hope of securing a just peace in Palestine/Israel. The parameters of the boycott and the opposition mounted against it are explored here by two of its leading proponents, even as they expose the double standards to which Israeli and Palestinian students and academics are subjected.

*Keywords:* AAUP, Birzeit university, BRICUP, European Research Area, Israel Lobby, separation wall, UCU

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*Hilary Rose* is a feminist sociologist of science. *Steven Rose* is a neuroscientist. They were jointly responsible for the initial moratorium call described in this article and are founder members of the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP).

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How has it come about that a country geographically located squarely in the Middle East has managed to persuade Europeans that it is actually part of Europe? Israel's footballers play in the UEFA cup, its singers compete in Eurovision song contests and its research scientists participate in the European Research Area (ERA). In part, this inclusion of a Middle East state in Europe is a guilt-laden response to the long history of European Christian anti-Semitism and its hideous culmination in the Shoah. Atonement combined with the Zionist project cleared the path for the creation of the state of Israel. But not only was this an act of atonement, it was also the export of what was so long called the 'Jewish problem' to the Middle East. That the 'Jewish problem' was more accurately the problem of anti-Semitism and its postwar re-emergence was glossed over.<sup>1</sup> The UN, in its support of the Zionist project, placed the heavy cost of this 'solution' on the Palestinian people and their lands. The Palestinians, not the Europeans, have paid and paid for the Naqba – the disaster when, sixty years ago, they were driven out of their homes and off their lands to provide space for the new state. Israel, despite its creation having been endorsed by the UN as part of the post-1945 affirmation of human rights, is also the last example of European colonial expansion. Zionist foundational texts, such as the autobiography of Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, writing in 1949, speak of Jewish migrants to Palestine as colonisers, settlers with a civilising mission to make the desert bloom.<sup>2</sup> The words 'colonisers' and 'settlers' are densely used within Weizmann's text. Emigrant European Jews were taught that Palestine was a 'land without people' for 'a people without land'. Perhaps not so different from Cecil Rhodes?

Israel's own foundational narrative centres on the European Holocaust and the right of Jews to return to their mythic place of origin, which they spoke of as the Jewish National Home. The legal narrative turns on the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Foreign Secretary Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild promising a Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>3</sup> With the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Britain had become responsible for Mandate Palestine and therefore a central player in geopolitical events in the Middle East and, hence, the future division into Palestine/Israel. Weizmann played a key role in driving British policy. He had consistently lobbied the Cabinet to support the Zionist project and his contribution to explosives manufacture had earned him its gratitude.<sup>4</sup> But, characteristically, the British were making contradictory promises to Arab nationalist groups. By accident, Weizmann himself received a copy of a secret British government proposal, made at a conference in 1939, for an Arab state of Palestine within five years.<sup>5</sup>

Israel's increasingly successful positioning as a European nation, *sui generis* entitled to take part in European cultural and commercial networks and institutions, is however at odds with its own demography. Although 80 per cent of Israel's population (that is, behind the 1967

border) is Jewish, only around half of these (Ashkenazi<sup>6</sup>) originate from Europe or the US, the others (Mizrahi) being from the Middle East or Africa. Nonetheless, Ashkenazis are massively over-represented in the elite strata of Israeli society. The political classes, the state institutions, the senior ranks of the military (the IDF), the arts and the universities are dominated by Jews of European origin. While gender justice is a matter of concern within Israeli academia, little interest has been shown towards ensuring ethnic diversity. Given this political and cultural pre-eminence, it is the Ashkenazi who have successfully constructed Israel as both the Jewish National Home and an integral part of Euro-America.

### **Why Israel is important to Europe**

European governments' willingness to go along with Israel's foundational narrative, though, is not merely a matter of sentiment or residual guilt. It requires more than this to explain why, despite Israel's continued breaches of international law and UN resolutions, European governments sit on their hands rather than take effective punitive action, and fail to enforce either the UN resolutions or the EU's own charter of human rights.<sup>7</sup> This extraordinary double standard, one that insists on Israeli exceptionalism, is supported in practice by many western governments, notably of course the US, but also many European states. Witness the silent refusal of their obligations under international law to enforce the judgement of the International Court of Justice concerning the illegality of the 9-metre so-called 'separation wall'. No more graphic examples are needed than three recent episodes: the first is the collusion of the UK authorities in preventing the arrest of the Israeli major-general Doron Almog on war crimes charges when he attempted to visit the UK in 2005.<sup>8</sup> The second is the revelation that in the first draft of Blair's 'dodgy dossier' on Iraq's nuclear weapons a reference to Israel's nuclear weapons had been inserted in the margin – then ignored in the final draft. Unsurprisingly, the government sought to prevent this fight in the margin from being revealed under the Freedom of Information Act, until a court order made the document public in February 2008.<sup>9</sup> Or, finally, consider an outrageous recent example when, in August 2007, Britain welcomed an Israeli football team to play a friendly match whilst at the same time denying visas to a Palestinian under-19 team to play a similar game. The Foreign Office reason for their exclusion, namely that the footballers were too poor to admit, reaches, in view of Prime Minister Brown's claimed war on global poverty, a new level of hypocrisy.<sup>10</sup> And it is precisely this refusal by governments to comply with international law and act in defence of Palestinian human rights that has, in part, led to the Palestinian call to international civil society for boycott, divestment and, ultimately, sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

UEFA and Eurovision may be marginal but Israel's scientific and technological wealth – Bill Gates described this tiny state as matching California's Silicon Valley – makes it a valued economic, scientific and technological partner. Israel's commitment to, and expertise in, the natural sciences, research and development, is formidable. In its eight universities, together with the Weizmann and Technion research institutes, and in fields ranging from mathematics and computing through sub-particle physics to molecular biology and neuroscience, Israel ranks amongst world leaders. It spends a higher proportion of GDP (4.7 per cent) on research and development (R&D) than any other country, including the US (2.6 per cent) – and nearly three times the UK's current investment of 1.7 per cent. Israel's universities, institutes and companies are rich in lucrative patents;<sup>11</sup> Israel is an inventor and exporter of high technology products and know-how, including military technology. In an increasingly globalised economy, scientific research, whether publicly or privately financed, has become international. Israel's science and technology are central drivers of this powerful knowledge economy. This pre-eminence is a matter of huge national pride and international prestige. It is here that Israel's participation in the ERA becomes so important, not just to Israel but also to an EU increasingly committed to neoliberalism and in retreat from the social market.

The ERA is funded by way of the transfer of a proportion of the national R&D budgets of EU member states to the European Commission's Research Directorate. Research is funded from this budget through five-year Framework Programmes. From their inception these have had three aims: to build a 'European identity' in research, to aid in wealth creation and quality of life and to strengthen research in less well-developed EU nations. Framework funds multinational R&D programmes involving universities, research institutes and small and medium enterprises. The current programme (FP7) began last year and is scheduled to spend €0.5 billion over its five-year life. Originally confined to EU member states, Framework expanded to include other European countries during the third programme and to Israel in the fourth. Over the past decade, Israel has been included in no less than 1,700 such R&D collaborations. Between now and 2013, the Israeli government is to contribute €40 million per year so that it can participate in Framework.

Currently, according to an international press service (IPS) report, the European Commission is considering new steps to deepen its cooperation on scientific research with Israel, despite admitting that previous funds earmarked for that purpose have gone to firms based in illegal settlements in the Palestinian territories. While this is in breach of the European directive which forbids trade with the illegal settlements, there are no signs that Europe is going to pursue the matter. An unpublished document prepared by EU diplomats reveals that, because much of the joint research will relate to security issues, Israel has requested a formal assurance

that any information it gives to Brussels will be treated confidentially. According to the IPS report:

Ton Van Lierop, the Commission's spokesman for enterprise and industry, acknowledged that the joint research with Israel will have a so-called anti-terrorist dimension. But he insisted that it will be focused on 'civil security' such as measures to improve ambulance and fire brigade services. 'It is not aimed at the military,' he said. 'We always have an ethical review of our programmes. Human rights are always at the forefront and are always important for the European Commission.'<sup>12</sup>

All Israel's eight universities, from Bar-Ilan to Tel-Aviv, as well as technical institutes and many companies, are active collaborators with European partners. Many of these collaborations involve UK universities – amongst Britain's most powerful research powerhouses. There are currently twenty-seven active projects at Imperial College and twenty-one at University College in London, for instance. Oxford and Cambridge have participated in 101 projects each with Israeli partners over the past decade.<sup>13</sup> Most are at the 'cutting edge' of science and technology – nanotechnology, molecular neuroscience, information technology. Others focus on more immediate practical matters such as water management and fishery stocks. It's worth remembering that, at the same time that these contracts are made, five Palestinian households may share a stand-tap in the street, and the illegal settlers may have swimming pools using water from the dangerously depleted aquifers. Further, while Gaza borders the sea, the Palestinians are forbidden to fish even while they are denied food supplies by Israel. Children and older people suffer with particular severity, and morbidity and mortality increase steadily – above all, in Gaza.

During the 2006 debate in the European Parliament on the research budget for the seventh Framework programme, the Greens tried to block participation by any country in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights. They did not name Israel but, instead, sought the reaffirmation of the Convention. For, over the last decade, with the intensification of Israeli human rights abuses, collective punishments, house demolitions, targeted assassinations and, most recently, the construction of the 'separation wall', the majority of European citizens have become profoundly concerned by Israel's policies. A Eurobarometer study in 2003 reported that 59 per cent of those surveyed saw Israel as the country posing the greatest threat to world peace.<sup>14</sup> A report by Amnesty International in June 2007 once more condemned the violations of international law by Israel.<sup>15</sup> Such violations challenge the appropriateness of Europe-Israel trade agreements and Israel's presence in the European Research Area.

The Greens' attempt, however, was firmly rebuffed, not only by the research commissioner, the Slovenian Janez Potocnik, but by many of their fellow parliamentarians, who unashamedly insisted that the calibre of Israeli research was so important that it took precedence over human rights.<sup>16</sup> On any occasion when the claim is made that science is above human rights, there are unpleasant echoes of the Nazi doctors' trial at Nuremberg. Then, the doctors and scientists argued confidently that what they were doing was good science, which, as such, would contribute to human welfare. And let us be clear; some of their findings did constitute 'good science' – but at an obscene cost in human suffering.

### **Academic life in Palestine**

It is not easy being a student – or teacher – in any Palestinian university. It is no more than about 15km as the crow flies between Birzeit, the premier Palestinian university near Ramallah, and the elite Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but they are worlds apart, separated both by checkpoints and the infamous 9-metre high apartheid (separation) wall. This journey, for anyone other than an Israeli or an Israeli-approved international, can take any time from about two hours to days. The institutions are also worlds apart in terms of the richness of the Israeli and poverty of the Palestinian universities – a difference exacerbated by Israel's reluctance and sometimes refusal to return the tax moneys paid by Palestinians. The 120,000 students and their 10,000 academic and other staff may be among the relatively privileged but, like all Palestinians, they suffer from systematic harassment and humiliation, and the stress and danger of living under occupation. Some are poor and have difficulty in paying their fees, but the universities rarely exclude them, not least as study is one of the few positive things in the lives of young Palestinians.

Getting from home to campus is itself an uncertain struggle. Israeli checkpoints can spring up overnight (there are more now than before the abortive 'peace talks' in Annapolis in 2007) and whether or not a student or academic will be allowed through depends on the whim of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldiers manning the blockade. Sometimes, when the roads are blocked by checkpoints, students will risk their lives crossing the hills to get to their classes. And, even if they do get through, their journeys may be fruitless as teaching may be arbitrarily stopped by the occupying Israeli military. Palestinian academics from the West Bank cannot visit the Hebrew University (which partly sits on illegally expropriated Palestinian land) because they do not have the right sort of ID. It is even difficult for Birzeit academics to get to the Palestinian university of Al Quds in east Jerusalem to teach, often being arbitrarily turned back at the Qalundia checkpoint, which separates their campuses. Israeli soldiers have turned back staff who are 'under 40' or, on another occasion, refused to let an assistant professor through on the grounds that, as an

assistant, he could not possibly be giving a lecture, as only professors can do this. A senior Palestinian mathematics professor was subjected to a maths 'exam' by an Israeli soldier (a maths professor in civilian life) at a checkpoint before he was allowed through.<sup>17</sup> Such humiliations are routine. Indeed the Israeli wall drives right through part of the Al Quds campus.

Birzeit was forcibly closed from March 2001 to December 2003. Lecturers continued to teach their students in secret, despite the risk that they and the students ran of being arrested and held without charge in 'administrative detention'. Birzeit's first president, the physicist Hanna Nasir, was hijacked by the Israelis and exiled to Jordan in 1974. Because of the unfailing support of his colleagues, he was able to administer the university from exile, until, following the Oslo accords in 1993, he was able to return and once more lead the university in person. (Just how many university presidents anywhere else in the world could rely on their colleagues' determined support for almost twenty years?)

Gazan students were a significant presence in the Birzeit student body until the Israeli government decided to tighten the noose around Gaza – this entailed stopping all freedom of movement for Gazans, including Birzeit students. For those in their last year, this was an especially cruel blow to their career hopes. Israel also prevented any new students being admitted.<sup>18</sup> Many Gazan students studying abroad have now either been prevented from returning home or, if home, prevented from returning to their studies. One rare successful fight against this abuse of human rights was that of the Bradford University student Khaled al Mudallal. He had returned to his home town of Rafah to get married and found himself trapped by the sealing of Gaza. At Bradford, his fellow students protested furiously, securing nationwide support. This put intense pressure on the UK government, leading to Israel giving him permission to leave Gaza. Back in Bradford, Khaled expressed his gratitude for the solidarity he had received that had led to his release, but forcefully pointed to hundreds of students still denied their right of freedom of movement as set out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Being relatively privileged does not mean that students or staff are free from the risk of arbitrary arrest. In August 2007, five Birzeit students active in their student council were arrested in a raid on their dormitories and homes by the IDF. Under the IDF occupation, membership of any political party or organisation is illegal. That the student council is solely concerned with academic support for fellow students was deemed irrelevant.<sup>19</sup> Currently, ninety-nine Birzeit students are detained without charge, nine of whom are imprisoned indefinitely under the British Mandate law still utilised by Israel. Students from the other Palestinian universities are similarly incarcerated. A couple of years ago, one of us was in Jerusalem attending a conference called by Faculty For Israeli Palestinian Peace (composed primarily of Jewish Israelis and Jewish

internationals). One of the Israeli academics had managed to secure passes for some half dozen Gazan students. Their hunger for the freedom to travel – to see Jerusalem, to meet international academics, even just to check out the shops – was visible. They hadn't been in Jerusalem twenty-four hours when the news came that they had been arrested. Immediately, a group of Israeli and international academics went to the police station to insist that the students had visas and that they should be released. This was heard with total indifference. Then one of the Israelis, an eminent scientist, rang the police chief. Afterwards, he told us that she had said that at university she had been taught by his wife. Whatever else was said, suddenly the students were released. It was difficult to think that it was anything other than the luck of this elite connection that had done the trick. The students came out towards us, some in tears, all with strained faces. Their fear was well grounded, as many have been arrested and detained without charge for lengthy periods. The point of rehearsing yet again an account of the institutionalised abuse and humiliation of young people is that, with all constructive avenues blocked by Israel, it itself acts as a recruiting sergeant for the armed intifada.

### **The not-so-silent complicity of Israeli universities**

Barring the statements of a courageous outspoken few, there has been a resounding silence from academics in Israeli universities about these attacks on Palestinian academic freedom. The late Tanya Reinhart, a distinguished Haifa professor of linguistics and a leading Israeli dissident, wrote a passionate attack on this silence.

Never in its history did the Senate of any Israeli university pass a resolution protesting the frequent closures of Palestinian universities, let alone voice protest over the devastation sowed there during the last uprising ... If in extreme situations of violations of human rights and moral principle, academia refuses to criticise and take a side, it collaborates with the oppressing system.<sup>20</sup>

We are constantly told that Israeli universities are one of the chief sources of criticism of and opposition to the government, yet, despite the heroic efforts of a very few, what is mostly audible, as Tanya Reinhart declares, is the silence of the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli academia. In the eighteenth century, the conservative political theorist Edmund Burke trenchantly observed that all that is needed for evil to be done is silence on the part of good men (and, the twenty-first century would add, women). Far from being the bastions of criticism of government policy, the universities have harboured few dissidents; rather, they have tended to harass the few there are. But such complicity is not surprising when it is recalled that Israeli Jewish academic staff also serve in the IDF, many as senior officers. So, too, do Israeli Jewish students. A recent *cause célèbre* has

been that of one of the few Palestinian lecturers in Israeli universities, Nizar Hassan. When an Israeli student came into one of his classes (in film studies) in military uniform and carrying a gun, the lecturer asked him to remove the uniform and attend classes in civilian clothes. The student refused and protested to the university authorities. The lecturer was ordered, under threat of dismissal, to apologise to the student for insulting the Israeli army.<sup>21</sup> The university's action was widely welcomed by the Israeli press. A further well-established case is that of Bar-Ilan university which, until it broke its links in the wake of the European boycott debates in 2005, fostered the work of the illegal College of Judea and Samaria in the illegal settlement of Ariel, in the illegally occupied West Bank.<sup>22</sup>

It is not only in reference to the abuses of Palestinian academic freedom in the Occupied Territories that Israeli academics are complicit. There are numerous examples of discrimination against Arab students in Israeli universities. In its compilation, 'The case for an academic boycott of Israel', the Alternative Information Center documents *de facto* age discrimination against Arab-Palestinian students; the illegal military service criterion in the allocation of housing; the failure to have signs in Arabic (as opposed to Hebrew and English) at Haifa; and the illegal seizure of Palestinian land to extend the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Tel-Aviv.<sup>23</sup> There are also multiple personal testimonies of anti-Arab racist abuse by Jewish students, unchecked by senior university staff. In August 2007, seven Arab and Jewish Israeli students, holding hands and with their mouths covered with tape, made a silent protest against the racist remarks of the student union spokesperson. They were arrested and charged with 'provoking a commotion' and 'wild behaviour'. When they were found innocent by a disciplinary tribunal, the university declared its intention to appeal the decision.<sup>24</sup>

In one now notorious case, Haifa professor of geography Arnon Sofer, who claims to be the 'architect' of the illegal separation wall, referred to the 'demographic problem', arguing in a press interview that:

If we want to remain alive we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day. If we don't kill we will cease to exist. The only thing that concerns me is how to ensure that the [Jewish] boys and men who are going to do the killing will be able to return home to their families and be normal human beings.<sup>25</sup>

Sofer's advocacy was in accord with the concerns of a conference at Haifa university, from which Arab Israeli academics were excluded, which discussed 'the demographic problem'. This focused on the differential birth-rate between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis and how to achieve the political objective of ensuring a permanent Jewish majority in Israel. That such an event could take place on any university campus with the support of the university authorities points to a more general problem in

treating Israeli universities as independent of the interests and policies of the Israeli regime.<sup>26</sup>

### **From moratorium to boycott**

It was in recognition of such abuses, within the context of Israel's overall record of ignoring UN resolutions, international law and human rights conventions, that, in April 2002, as part of a growing number of calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions against the Israeli state, a short letter (signed by some 120 European academics and researchers), was published in the London *Guardian*. It read as follows:

Despite widespread international condemnation for its policy of violent repression against the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories, the Israeli government appears impervious to moral appeals from world leaders. The major potential source of effective criticism, the United States, seems reluctant to act. However there are ways of exerting pressure from within Europe. Odd though it may appear, many national and European cultural and research institutions, including especially those funded from the EU and the European Science Foundation, regard Israel as a European state for the purposes of awarding grants and contracts. (No other Middle Eastern state is so regarded.) Would it not therefore be timely if, at both national and European level, a moratorium was called upon any further such support unless and until Israel abides by UN resolutions and opens serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, along the lines proposed in many peace plans, including most recently that sponsored by the Saudis and the Arab League.<sup>27</sup>

The affirmation of human rights is a precondition of participation in the EU, whether as a member or as a trading and research partner, and the call for a moratorium touched a nerve amongst those many European citizens increasingly distressed and angered by Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. Before long, several hundred names had been added to the original signatories. Later that year, the moratorium was adopted by the UK Association of University Teachers (AUT). A number of French universities, notably Paris IV, made a stronger call<sup>28</sup> which unleashed a powerful Zionist backlash, claiming – what has become another routinised charge against any criticism of Israel – that it is by definition anti-Semitic.

In response to the moratorium call, Hanna Nasir sent a brief but poignant thanks, saying 'we thought Europe had forgotten us'. At the same time, the call evoked an intensely hostile response both from within Israel itself and from what we have subsequently learned to call the Israel Lobby, primarily in the US but also strongly present in the UK and France.<sup>29</sup> The email response system set in train by the Lobby unleashed

a storm of hate mail on to the screens of moratorium supporters. Such messages as ‘You should have been Auschwitzed’, ‘You are worse than a Kapo’ (a Jewish concentration camp assistant guard) were not atypical.<sup>30</sup> Such toxic abuse came in the defence of what the Lobby claimed was the academic freedom of Israeli universities.

Then, in July 2004, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), a Palestinian civil society group, released a statement, endorsed by campus trade unions and NGOs on the West Bank, asking for a comprehensive boycott.<sup>31</sup> The Birzeit university president reinforced this call in an open letter to members of the European Parliament.<sup>32</sup> In response to the PACBI call, a group of academics working in British universities formed the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) to campaign for the boycott in the universities and in the academic trade unions, and also to find practical ways to support their Palestinian colleagues.<sup>33</sup>

In 2005, the annual AUT congress passed a resolution calling for the boycott of three Israeli universities, Haifa, the Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan, a resolution that was overturned a few months later by a specially convened AUT meeting after intense lobbying by pro-Israeli groups. The National Association of Teachers in Higher and Further Education (NATHFE) remained steadily committed to the Palestinian cause and in 2006 passed a resolution which invited teachers to consider their moral responsibilities before embarking on collaborations with Israeli institutions. In 2007, AUT and NATFHE merged to form the new University and College Union (UCU) and all previous resolutions were put on hold until the first joint annual conference in May. There, the moratorium was re-endorsed and a moderate resolution was passed by a two-thirds majority, instructing the union to inform itself of the issues and to this purpose to invite Palestinian academic trade unionists to a series of UCU meetings, prior to any binding resolution for a boycott.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the boycott movement itself was expanding. By the time the European Parliament was debating FP7, the moratorium calls were already being superseded by those for BDS – boycott, divestment and sanctions – against what was increasingly being seen as the apartheid state of Israel. Campaigning groups such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in the UK were already demonstrating against the sale of Israeli and, above all, illegally labelled settler products – the latter mainly fruit and herbs in the supermarkets. In the UK, calls were made for architects and planners to refuse to take part in projects involving work in the illegal settlements.<sup>35</sup> Following appeals by Palestinian filmmakers, John Berger initiated a call for a cultural boycott of Israel, with appeals being made to individual performers, filmmakers and writers not to participate in cultural events celebrating Israel’s sixtieth year as a state in 2008.<sup>36</sup> Most powerfully, doctors and health workers in the UK, supported by Israeli Physicians for Human Rights, called for a boycott of the Israel Medical

Association on the grounds, amongst others, that it condoned torture and refused to condemn the targeting of Palestinian ambulances by the IDF.<sup>37</sup>

### **The new McCarthyism**

The UCU vote was received with something resembling acute consternation both in Israel and among its supporters abroad, especially in the UK and US. In the US, the Israel Lobby swung into action, organising condemnatory statements from university presidents and vice-chancellors and Nobel prizewinners. It was condemned in Congress (only one dissident Congressman pointed to the absurdity of a US legislature debating the merits of a vote by a UK trade union). Full-page advertisements appeared in the *New York Times*. In the UK, the Jewish Board of Deputies announced that it was establishing a £1 million fund to fight the boycott and legal action was threatened against any university which supported it. The UCU head office took its own legal advice and was warned that even to discuss a boycott might be a breach of its own statutes and race relations legislation.<sup>38</sup> The Palestinian tour was initially called off but, after pressure from UCU members and especially its national delegate congress (representing all colleges and universities in the UK), was reinstated for May 2008, with the proviso that the visiting Palestinian academics, whilst discussing the situation on the ground on Palestinian campuses, did not specifically call for a boycott. Though quite how the UCU proposed to limit its Palestinian colleagues' academic freedom of speech in this regard is unclear.

Despite the attempts to argue that the boycott call was anti-Semitic, both the initial moratorium call and the subsequent BRICUP statement referred specifically to an institutional boycott, not to one aimed at individuals of any specific nationality or ethnicity. Thus, while it would cover non-Jewish and non-Israeli academics working in Israeli universities, it would not affect Israelis working outside Israel. Moreover, the initial PACBI call sought to exclude from the boycott individual Israeli academics working directly with the Palestinians for peace and justice, in an attempt to avoid some of those painful contradictions that the ANC's total boycott call had produced.<sup>39</sup> Such contradictions are, as the freedom struggle demonstrated, both unavoidable and at the same time sometimes cruelly unjust at a personal level. Recognising these impossibilities, PACBI modified its position. But this 'exceptionalist' clause did not merit the Israel Lobby's fatuous claim that a civil society group with powers only of moral persuasion could unleash a force resembling McCarthyism.

However, a new McCarthyism is emerging in the US, with the passing of the Patriot Act. Groups such as Campus Watch study university syllabuses, particularly those of Middle East studies, and, where they find

the approach is too critical, seek to exert pressure to censor the teaching content and censure the teacher. Four recent examples will suffice: first, the denial of tenure at DePaul university to the historian of the Holocaust Norman Finkelstein, following a campaign led by the Harvard lawyer Alan Dershowitz;<sup>40</sup> second, the attempt to achieve something similar at Barnard College, against the archaeologist Nadia Abu El-Haj.<sup>41</sup> In this case, the College stood firm and El-Haj obtained tenure. The Lobby was more successful in ensuring the cancellation of lectures to be given in New York by the historian Tony Judt and, in Chicago, by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (on account of their meticulous study of the workings of the Lobby).

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which was silent during cold war McCarthyism, when academic freedom and free speech suffered, today stands alongside the American Civil Liberties Union defending academics against this new McCarthyism. Despite this welcome development, the AAUP as a body opposes a boycott of Israeli universities just as it opposed a boycott of apartheid South African universities. For the AAUP, academic freedom is not socially located; it is an abstraction to be defended as an absolute principle. Numbers of individual academics have not usually subscribed to this absolutism and boycotted South African universities in the past, as today numbers boycott Israel's universities.<sup>42</sup> However, the AAUP and indeed many of the signatories to the unqualified claim for the academic freedom of Israeli universities take the position that academic freedom automatically trumps the claims of human rights.

### **The limits of academic freedom**

Yet such a stance flies in the face of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, out of the ashes of the death camps, set out a vision of a world where the human rights of all humanity were both recognised and to be made real:

In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedom of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare of a democratic society. Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 29(2).<sup>43</sup>

Yet what Israel and its Lobby continuously seek is to displace Israel as the target of criticism and, instead, to relocate the focus of discussion on an abstract, context-free discourse of 'academic freedom', in which the illegal Israeli occupation, military repression and the very real physical and psychological sufferings of the Palestinian people disappear. The discourse of the Lobby denies the rights of others that the Declaration

demands. This ideological and politically driven impulse to defend Israel and her universities, right or wrong, is particularly strong in right-wing quarters but disturbingly widespread across the political spectrum. It has been able to derive strength by commandeering this abstract discourse of academic freedom. Today we hear a great deal about the celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel in 1948; perhaps we should reflect that this was also the year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The US philosopher Judith Butler comments that ‘material and institutional foreclosures ... make it impossible for some historical subjects to lay claim to the discourse of rights itself’.<sup>44</sup> So when that impossibility happens, and Palestinian civil society suffering extreme oppression does lay claim to the discourse of rights, just what, given the failure of the international community either to defend the Declaration or uphold international law, should civil society do? In this, university teachers are simply part of civil society, and increasing numbers wish to express their solidarity by supporting the Palestinian call for an academic boycott. It is the boycotters, not the apologists for Israel, who are upholding human rights.

Israeli academics’ silence, especially contrasted to their noisy outcry at any hint of a threat to their own academic freedom, represents a grotesque double standard. Yet many, despite the announcements of the collapse of the enlightenment, are still the children of Diderot and insist that rights are constrained to protect the rights of others. Thus, in Britain, remarks such as those made by Arnon Sofer would fall under the rubric of racist speech and incitement to violence and be subject to prosecution, just as the leader of the British National Party was charged for expressing not dissimilar sentiments concerning Muslims, as was also an imam from Finsbury Park mosque for his comments on Jews. On 9 March 2008, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith banned Likud Central Committee member Moshe Feiglin from entering the UK on the grounds that he had used words very similar to those of Sofer.<sup>45</sup> Providing the charges are made against all forms of racism and all expressions of incitement to violence, a postcolonial British political and ethical culture supports such restrictions on the freedom of speech.

In the case of Palestine/Israel the question is, therefore, with whom are we to solidarise? With our oppressed Palestinian colleagues? Or with the academics of their oppressor regime? If academic freedom is precious to every academic are there, as an article in *Nature* asked, any circumstances when boycotts can be justified?<sup>46</sup> In 1965, 365 academics wrote a letter to the London *Times* urging the case for an academic boycott of apartheid South Africa. Many academics supported the boycott as their contribution to what was to become an immense international movement. For that matter, today British academic trade unions infrequently but routinely impose ‘grey listing’ status (*de facto* almost indistinguishable from a temporary boycott)

on colleges and universities to challenge cases of institutionalised racism against minority ethnic staff or to protect academic staff from systematic managerial bullying.

The furore around the academic boycott and a highly abstract discussion of academic freedom has glossed over a number of total boycotts demanded or imposed by western governments on entire countries. Cuba's boycott by the US has to be one of the longest. More recently the US government has demanded that leading scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Science* refuse to publish articles submitted by Iranians, and the Israeli ex-premier Binyamin Netanyahu has called for a total boycott of Iran.<sup>47</sup> To their credit, the scientific journals have fought back, successfully defending their right to select publications by quality and not by even the most powerful of western governments. The Euro-American boycott of the Hamas-led Palestinian government ignores both the internationally observed democratic election and the ensuing suffering of the Palestinian people, their underfed children and the concomitant dreadful mortality rate, while condoning the arrest of Hamas parliamentarians, including the minister of education, by Israelis. Those who vigorously defend the academic freedom of Israeli universities in the face of an ethically driven boycott and who are silent about the economic strangling and physical attacks by Israel on the Palestinian universities are guilty of – at minimum – double standards.

What seems so paradoxical is that it is precisely those who are so loudly opposed to the boycott who attempt to have any discussion of it suppressed, as Fiona Godlee pointed out in an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* after it had run two articles, one for and one opposed to the boycott, and organised a poll among its readers.<sup>48</sup> When the AAUP, itself opposed to the boycott, organised a conference with pro- and anti-boycott speakers to be held in Italy in January 2006, the Lobby put such pressure on the funding foundations that they withdrew their support at the last minute. To its credit, the AAUP refused to bow to the Lobby's pressure and stuck to its commitment to publish the papers in its professional bulletin. Bar-Ilan University in Israel (under criticism for fostering an illegal extension in the settler town of Ariel) called its own conference on academic freedom. Despite this being listed as a 'debate', the organisers only invited those opposed to the boycott.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, even hearing oppositional arguments was incompatible with this Israeli construction of academic freedom.

### **Are economic and academic boycotts similar or different?**

Some opponents of an academic boycott have argued that it is different in kind from an economic boycott. On the face of it, this is an attractive distinction but, in the twenty-first century, the distinction is, at best, a rearguard fight to preserve some residual cultural space and, at worst, an

expression of nostalgia for a past world. In today's knowledge economy, matters are arranged rather differently and the claimed distinction seeks to mask the fundamental changes that have taken place in the production system of knowledge as part of globalisation, especially, but not exclusively, in science and technology – precisely those areas in which academic collaboration between Israeli and European academics is so strong.

To see why, it is necessary to understand that, whereas once it was arguably possible to distinguish between science and technology, that distinction is no longer viable in the global economy. In these 'hot' fields, academic research findings are frequently secret, protected by patents. 'Chinese walls' inhibit the exchange of information between researchers even in the same department unless both have signed non-disclosure agreements. Biotechnology, embryonic stem cell research, nanotechnology and informatics are among the key drivers of postindustrial society. Indeed, pre-eminence in these areas is seen as crucial for the UK (and Europe) not only to keep up with the present super-state of the US but to be ready for the emerging new superpowers – China, India, maybe Singapore. Governments, especially the UK's, exhort university chiefs to encourage their academic staff to get closer to business to help foster innovation. Natural science research is strongly oriented towards wealth creation and quality of life;<sup>50</sup> social science research programmes are all too often directed to how these natural science advances could become socially acceptable.

These practices are pervasive features of a new system of knowledge production. Biotechnology and informatics are increasingly funded by industry and the military, and integral to a global neoliberal economy. 'Intellectual property' is the term that so brutally links the academic and the economic. It stalks the universities of the world and daily diminishes their autonomy and, with it, the claim to academic freedom. It is precisely in the context of today's knowledge economy, rather than in some abstract universe, that the distinction that some wish to draw between a possibly acceptable economic boycott and an unacceptable, academic boycott becomes unsustainable. For a country like Israel, whose universities are central to her position in the global market place, above all in informatics and biotechnology, an international boycott would not only affect the universities but the economy itself. The Israeli economy is distorted by its massive expenditures on illegal settlements, illegal roads, the illegal wall and, of course, the illegal military occupation itself. It is not just Israel's poor who are feeling the pinch but even academic staff have struck over their salaries. Israeli universities position themselves as central players within a globalised knowledge society and, at the same moment, claim the values of a past world where universities once had a high degree of autonomy from both state and industry.

## From boycott to disinvestment and sanctions

As Nelson Mandela has pointed out, boycotts are a tactic in political struggle. They may or may not be appropriate or effective depending on the circumstances. When the ANC, facing a desperate crisis, called for a total boycott, it was not the academic but the sporting boycott of apartheid that the media seized on in Britain. This dramatically raised public awareness and, as one of many strands contributing to the pressure for change, led ultimately to UN sanctions. The Israeli state recognised immediately that an academic boycott and the furious debate that it engendered would similarly draw massive media attention and nourish the rising anger of civil society. The Likud cabinet itself established an anti-boycott committee with Binyamin Netanyahu as its chair. For Israel, the threat was too great to be left to the university administrations to respond.

So, in all of this, where does an academic boycott fit in, and what chance is there of the tactic working? While international media from the *New York Times* to *Al Jazeera* and endless websites have focused on the academic boycott and, above all, on the struggle within the British University and College Union, this particular fight is just one moment in a growing movement of international support for the just cause of the Palestinians. In significant part, the boycott of Israel – academic, professional and cultural – is an expression of the despair and anger of international civil society, including academics, over the failure of our governments and the European Union to help pressure Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians to build – not just peace, but a just peace.

The bigger picture is not just the academic boycott and not just the fight within one academic trade union, but an economic boycott of Israeli products (above all, those from the illegal settlements), not least by Jewish groups. There are community groups and student unions twinning with villages and student unions in Palestine; there is a vigorous campaign against Caterpillar;<sup>51</sup> musicians, writers and filmmakers are actively organising a cultural boycott; the churches, especially in the US, are disinvesting in Israel; industrial and white collar trade unions support the boycott; the doctors' group works to eject Israel from the World Medical Association. Boycott, together with disinvestment and eventually international sanctions, can be a non-violent but powerful form of struggle. Crucially, the BDS movement supports Palestinian civil society, so long crushed but not defeated by the occupation. Both Palestinian and international civil society have an essential part to play in the long haul to secure a just peace in Palestine/Israel.

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  - 3 In 1917, a letter from Arthur Balfour, addressed to Lord Rothschild, set out the terms of the Declaration, which committed the British government to supporting the establishment in Palestine of a national home for Jews. The letter also added protection of the civil rights of any non-Jewish residents – a point Weizmann disliked. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
  - 4 Balfour was both intensely Christian and anti-Semitic, and saw in Zionism an opportunity to regroup the Jews in Palestine to await the coming of the Messiah.
  - 5 Weizmann, *op. cit.*, p. 499.
  - 6 Israeli definitions of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi/Sephardi populations do not match those used by European Jewry, hence care must be taken with comparison.
  - 7 UN resolutions begin in 1948 with the General Assembly affirming the right of return of the Palestinian refugees: 'Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.' Subsequent resolutions include: 'Israel's occupation of Palestine is illegal', Security Council Resolution 242 (22 November 1967) and 'Israel's settlements in Palestine are illegal', Security Council Resolution 446 (22 March 1979), which 'Determines that the policy and practices of Israel in establishing settlements in the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967 have no legal validity and constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.' See also 'Palestinians have the right to self-determination', General Assembly Resolution 3236, 22 November 1974. However, the US power of veto in the Security Council has been used to block all but the most blatant examples of illegality, e.g., 242 and 446. Britain's long subservience to the US is reflected by her supportive abstentions.
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