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*By: Robbie Friedmann*

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#### **Academic Boycotts: Terrorism by Other Means**

**By Robbie Friedmann, Ph.D.**  
**GILEE Founding Director**  
**Professor Emeritus of Criminal Justice**  
**Georgia State University**

If war is politics by other means, calls for academic boycotts are terrorism by other means. Boycotts take many shapes and forms: against companies, against products, against artists, against statements, and against social groups. But most troubling are calls for academic boycotts against a people based on national origin.

Such calls do not focus on legitimate grievances with a country, but appear to be against the very existence of that country and its people, in this case against Jews and the state of Israel. Jews and Israelis have a long history of being boycotted, exiled, and ostracized throughout the millennia. When not physically persecuted, murdered, or forced to convert, they were shunned as “undesirable” and relegated to second-class citizens or in some cases were not even accorded that status. In other cases they lived under the benevolent protection of a prince or a feudal lord. At times it was not so benevolent.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe discussed the “Jewish Question:” namely what to do with the Jews. Various solutions were offered and, whether sympathetic to the Jews (such as the Balfour Declaration) or less than sympathetic, they showed one direction to Jews: out of Europe. Jews did not wait for such guidance, and in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century started to form the movement of political Zionism. Namely, advocating the return of Jews to their homeland in Zion.

After 66 years of activism and after enduring the Holocaust, the remnants of the Jewish people have established the modern State of Israel. The pre-state community endured many pogroms in Jaffa and Hebron and constant feuds with the growing Arab community (whose significant portion arrived there attracted by jobs in Jewish agricultural and industrial sectors).

In 1947 the Arabs rejected the November 29 UN Partition Resolution, and on May 14, 1948, upon the pending exit of the British Mandatory Government, the State of Israel was declared. This was followed by orchestrated attacks on the fledgling country by the surrounding neighbors. The Arabs lost and lost again in 1956 and 1967 (and in 1970, 1973, 1982, and 2006). Not all wars were

won by Israel as decisively as in 1967, but they have all sent an unequivocal message to the Arabs that it is impossible to eliminate Israel by military force. Yet the onslaught against Israel was not limited to the war front and the physical battlefield.

An official ongoing boycott against Israel was declared by the Arab League shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, and, while it had limited economic success, it was unable to suffocate Israel as was intended since a growing number of countries and companies tended to ignore the Arab boycott. Ironically, even Arabs themselves took advantage of medical treatment in Israel (for leaders) or of Israeli products as long as the “Made in Israel” label was removed.

Given the inability to win by war or to destroy Israel by resorting to vicious terrorist acts on the civilian population, the start of the new millennium gave rise to a new onslaught of economic, cultural, academic and business boycott that is aimed at de-legitimizing Israel as a country by using against it all measures of “lawfare” alongside encouraging/demanding entertainers/artists not to appear in Israel, and raiding various stores to pull Israeli products off the shelves. Particularly notorious have been efforts at academic and various union boycotts against Israel in Europe, the UK, the US, and Canada.

This effort is totalitarian in nature and has emerged with vengeance after the 2001 UN Human Rights Conference in Durban was hijacked by various NGOs that promoted this boycott against Israel under what is known as the BDS campaign. Later it was joined by various sister organizations, satellite organizations and other sympathetic parties that were thrilled to portray Israel as a “genocidal Apartheid” country. Jimmy Carter’s (discredited) book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (2006) only added fuel to the fire, and no amount of valid criticism of it was successful in attenuating its damage.

While various reviews suggest that the cultural and economic boycotts have not been effective (and in particular this references the 10 years of the BDS efforts since 2000), it has by no means compressed the attempts at the de-legitimization of Israel. On the contrary, internet sites, social and political groups, and academics are in the forefront of incessant efforts to continue the Arab claims since 1948 (and before) that Israel has no right to exist. Now the reversal of “Jews out of Europe” became “Jews out of Palestine.”

Across campuses around the world, but particularly in Europe, UK, US, Canada (and even Israel), calls for boycott are supported by an assortment of groups that range from those with a genuine desire to reach some sort of settlement believing that if only Israel will make all the concessions peace will come to the area, to groups that often use them to advance a far more sinister agenda of eliminating Israel altogether. For the latter groups Israel can do no good and Israel’s mere existence is an affront. This absolutist position is the one that makes the BDS campaign a formidable weapon as every time reporters, politicians, civic groups, international bodies and even governments question Israel’s actions (while refraining from doing so for Arab-Muslim countries, NGOs or quasi governments such as Hamas and Hizbullah) it further erodes Israel’s stature in the world. A chorus of countries regularly issues condemnations of Israel in various UN forums.

The BDS campaign has succeeded in harnessing the cooperation and support of various partners from rather unexpected corners, and is latching on to university-based programs that are affiliated with Israel in an attempt to cut these ties. This is done by either demanding that the connection be dropped or by demanding that the programs be shut down. Israel is treated like a leper that everyone needs to stay away from. Paper, the internet, and other media means will tolerate any narrative and any accusation no matter how egregious. Utilizing the Big Lie Technique, it is based on repetition of repugnant claims that are then treated as real just because

they are used and mentioned unquestionably long enough.

At Georgia State University this campaign has been spearheaded by the *Progressive Student Alliance*. The students are supported by the *American Friends Service Committee* and by the *Movement to End Apartheid in Israel-Georgia* as well as several other groups such as *Electronic Intifada* and the *Georgia Green Party*. The students submitted a petition to the university president to close down a law enforcement executive development program called the *Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange* (GILEE) because of its academic, research and programmatic ties to Israel. The students have circulated fliers and demonstrated at the university with calls to “close,” “shut down,” “end,” or “eliminate” GILEE, claiming that GILEE is responsible for “murder” and “enslavement.” GILEE’s guilt? The association with Israel.

Facts, context, history, track record, and recognition of GILEE programs do not amount to much for these students and their supporters. It also matters little that GILEE has programs with a large number of other states and countries, but the connection to Israel raises such a red flag for them that they demand closing the program. The totalitarian dimension of their activity is expressed in the incessant effort at de-legitimizing the State of Israel and, by association, those affiliated with Israel. It is also expressed in the fact that, for them, Israel has no right to exist and that programs associated with Israel have no right to exist. In other words, only their opinion and their pet object(s) have legitimacy.

Their effort is nothing short of a witch-hunt, and it has all the elements of a libel, defamation, and persecution. Dialogue, learning, understanding, debate, compassion, and respect are abjectly missing from their one-sided, arrogant narrative. Constantly playing the role of the victim, they do not leave much option to the real targeted victim: commit suicide (stop relations with Israel) or we will push you over the cliff (demand your program be closed).

This is not a conflict over territory, nor is it about a product. It is a totalitarian conflict where the right of Israel to exist - and for Jews to have their own country - is negated and denied. Given the uni-dimensional approach and the lack of proper discourse, it was important to provide a narrative that opposes boycotts by and of universities (or programs therein). Indeed, such a narrative was recently provided when 40 Nobel laureates signed a statement opposing boycotts arguing that, “Academic and cultural boycotts, divestments and sanctions in the academy are antithetical to principles of academic and scientific freedom,” and maintaining that “We believe that the university should serve as an open, tolerant and respectful, co-operative and collaborative community engaged in practices of resolving complex problems.”

The boycotting students demanded to meet with the university president, and Dr. Mark Becker met with them recently and rejected their demand to shut GILEE down. It is highly likely that the president’s rejection of the boycott demand would have been issued without the Nobel laureates’ statement, but it is also clear that the narrative offered in the statement provided the moral grounds and the articulation of a sound position of academic values that supports taking a strong stand against such boycott efforts. In that sense the Nobel laureates’ statement was timely and most helpful.

This does not mean the students and their supporters will cease boycott efforts. Indeed, a BDS related web site has already attacked the Nobel statement by (falsely) arguing that boycotts are not against individuals but are against “organizations that are complicit in maintaining a system of colonial domination.” It further states that “...protection of academic freedom...cannot be the only norm dictating the political engagement of scholars,” and that “the aim of the academic boycott of Israel, in this context, is not to safeguard academic freedom as an abstract principle, but to obtain justice and fundamental rights for the Palestinian people.” Apparently what they

refer to as rights and justice must be achieved by denying it to Israel. To demand that university-based programs be closed because of their ties with Israel is sheer chutzpah.

It is therefore most encouraging that in this round a university president provided a cogent demonstration of how to act against academic boycotts and how to ascertain what universities stand for. The Nobel laureates showed the way.

## Comments

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**Scholars For Peace in the Middle East**