

## COMMENTARY

### An Academic Hijacking

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When a relatively small number of British academics tried to hijack the traditional trade union agenda of the British University and College Union by calling for an academic boycott of Israel, they expected little opposition. The union, after all, is British, and the nation whose academics were to be boycotted is Israel.

Anti-Israel sentiment among left-wing academics, journalists, and politicians in Britain is politically correct and relatively uncontroversial (as is anti-American sentiment). Several years earlier, a petition to boycott several Israeli universities initially passed but was later rescinded, and the British National Union of Journalists has also voted to boycott Israeli products. At about the same time, a British academic journal fired two of its board members apparently because they were Israeli Jews. Some popular British political leaders, most notoriously, London's Mayor "Red Ken" Livingstone, have made anti-Israel statements that border on anti-Semitism, in one instance comparing a Jewish journalist to a Nazi "war criminal."

Many of the academics who have been pushing the boycott most energetically

are members of hard-left socialist-worker groups. These radicals devote more time and energy to international issues than to the domestic welfare of their own members, who have suffered a serious decline in salary and working conditions. Their pet peeve, sometimes it appears their only peeve, is the Israeli occupation -- not of the West Bank and, before its return, of Gaza but rather of all of Palestine, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. These are not advocates of the two-state solution, but of a one-state dissolution of Israel, with the resulting state being controlled by Hamas.

In a world in which dissident academics are murdered in Iran, tortured in Egypt, imprisoned in China and fired in many other parts of the world, the British Union decided to boycott only academics from a country with as much academic freedom as in Britain and far more academic freedom -- and more actual academic dissent -- than in any Arab or Muslim country. Indeed, Arabs have more academic (and journalistic) freedom in Israel, even in the West Bank, than in any Arab or Muslim nation.

But these union activists couldn't care less about academic freedom, or any other kind of freedom for that matter. Nor do they care much about the actual plight of the Palestinians. If they did, they would be supporting the Palestinian Authority in its efforts to make peace with Israel based on mutual compromise, rather than Hamas in its futile efforts to destroy Israel as well as the PA.

What they care about -- and all they seem to care about -- is Israel, which they despise, without regard to what the Jewish state actually does or fails to do. The fact that this boycott effort is being undertaken at precisely the time when Israel has ended the occupation of Gaza and is reaching out to the PA, and even to Syria, in an effort to make peace proves that the boycott is not intended to protest specific Israeli policies or actions, but rather to delegitimize and demonize Israel as a democratic Jewish nation. One union activist said on a BBC radio show that "Israel is worse than Stalinist Russia."

The boycotters know that Israel, without oil or other natural resources, lives by its universities, research centers and other academic institutions. After the U.S., Israeli scientists hold more patents than any nation in the world, have more start-up companies listed on Nasdaq, and export more life-saving medical technology.

Israelis have received more Nobel and other international science prizes than all the Arab and Muslim nations combined. Cutting Israel's academics off from collaboration with other academics would deal a death blow to the Israeli high-tech economy, but it would also set back research and academic collaboration throughout the world.

Moreover, many Israeli academics, precisely those who would be boycotted, are at the forefront in advocating peace efforts. They, perhaps more than others, understand the "peace dividend" the world would reap if Israeli

military expenses could be cut and the money devoted to life-saving scientific research.

It is for these reasons that so many American academics, of all religious, ideological and political backgrounds, reacted so strongly to the threat of an academic boycott against Israel. As soon as it was reported, I helped to draft a simple petition in which signatories agreed to regard themselves as honorary Israeli academics for purposes of any boycott and "decline to participate in any activity from which Israeli academics are excluded."

Working with Prof. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in physics, and Ed Beck, the president of Scholars For Peace in the Middle East, we circulated the petition. I expected to gather several hundred signatures.

To my surprise, we have secured nearly 6,000 signatures, including those of 20 Nobel Prize winners, 14 university presidents as well as several heads of academic and professional societies. Three university presidents -- Lee Bollinger of Columbia, Robert Birgeneau of Berkeley and John Sexton of New York University -- have issued public statements declaring that if Israeli universities are boycotted, their American universities should be boycotted as well. Every day, I receive emails from other academics asking to be included as honorary Israeli academics for purposes of any boycott. We expect to reach at least 10,000 names on our petition.

It is fair to say, therefore, that the British boycott appears to be backfiring. British academics are on notice that if they try to isolate Israeli academics, it is they -- the British academics -- who will end up being isolated from some of the world's most prominent academics and scientists.

No one wants that to happen. Academics and scientists should collaborate with each other in the interests of promoting knowledge. The hope is that this ill-conceived boycott will be voted down by general membership of the university and college union, and that those radicals who are pushing it will be delegitimized in the eyes of the vast majority of British academics who will not want to see their union hijacked by single-issue bigots.

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