

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE AUT BOYCOTT CAMPAIGN:

EXAMINING THE LESSONS

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Revised August 10, 2005

Text for presentation at the annual conference of the National Postgraduate
Committee, UK , August 12 2005, Glasgow

First, I would like to express my appreciation and that of my colleagues to the members of the NPC, and to the many academics and students who recognized the threats to the principle of academic freedom from the AUT boycott effort. You stood up to be counted by promoting its repeal by an overwhelming majority. In the intolerant environment of anti-Israel hysteria, this was perhaps politically incorrect, but it was certainly the morally correct position in the face of an anti-academic and anti-democratic boycott.

The principles of academic freedom and equality among members of the scientific community have a long and revered history. The right to follow the research trail and search for knowledge, without regard to whose toes may be in the way, or whose interests and power may be threatened, is not an empty slogan, to be tossed away by political and ideological fashion.

This freedom forms the foundation of liberal western civilization, and the norms of pluralism and tolerance that are part of this tradition. The term “academic boycott” is, in itself, inherently contradictory, similar to “democratic

dictatorship”, whether of the “advance guard of the proletariat” or in some other guise.

Without champions of academic freedom who were willing to fight for this principle and the right to dissent in the pursuit of knowledge, the teachings of Socrates would not have survived his execution. Similarly, Galileo’s discoveries would have been buried with him, and the world would still be flat. The complexities of the process of evolution, and its insights as well as limitations, would still be considered heretical. And the practice of slavery might still be an acceptable norm, to say nothing of depriving women and minorities of basic rights.

And, following Orwell’s scenarios, crackpot theories that serve the interests and ideologies of the dominant political powers would have been enshrined as orthodoxies. Under the Nazis, theories of Aryan racial superiority were part of standard university fare, and “Jewish science” was anathema, while the Jews – beginning with Einstein, Meitner, Born, and thousands more – were expelled or fled, and those that remained were sent to concentration camps. In the heyday of the Soviet empire, the economic superiority of communism was taught as unquestioned gospel, until reality intruded, and this superiority turned into dust.

Similarly, in other dictatorships – the military juntas of South America, Islamic republics and monarchies of the Middle East, or China’s one-party version of democratic centralism – academic freedom was and remains unthinkable.

Teachers and researchers who go outside the strict limits set by the sources

of political, and in many cases, religious power are censored, harassed, jailed, and in some cases, even murdered. In the Islamic tyrannies, even receiving an email from an Israeli colleague or scientist is a punishable offense.

In the campaign to boycott Israeli universities, which was first launched in 2002, and continued to be pressed until the 2005 AUT meeting, one of the common allegations was “the absence of academic freedom” in Israel.

Like other “big lies” in recent history, this one has been repeated so many times that many start repeating it as fact, without examining the evidence. But like so many other aspects of the Israeli reality, this one reflects the degree to which myths and ideology have replaced information and analysis. Instead of serious examination of various claims, as would be appropriate to an academic framework, and in which the judgement is left until after the facts are gathered, in the case of Israel, the judgement is almost first, and the facts are found to match it. Usually, these “facts” are provided by a small number of marginal and obsessive Israelis, whose claims are taken at face value and propagated without any independent examination. If the members of the AUT were to adopt decisions on science or mathematics on the basis of such a process, they would soon understand the folly of this procedure. But when it comes to Middle East politics, the normal rules of research and rational discourse are suspended.

I will not stand here and claim that Israeli behavior and policies are perfect – like other Israeli citizens, I also have my criticisms. But even our most virulent

Palestinian enemies admit and admire one aspect of Israeli society – its democracy, openness and unfettered free speech, and this certainly applies to the university campuses, classrooms, and publications.

Although the five major universities, along with the Technion and the Weizman Institute, are funded through government budgets (as well as donations and grants), there is no government interference in the substance of the activities. Government officials have no role in academic appointments, and the Higher Education Council is autonomous.

As a result, in every sphere of academic endeavor and research – in the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences – no schools, theories or methodologies are excluded. Israeli microbiologists, including my colleagues at Bar Ilan University, are active in probing the latest genetic engineering and stem cell research, and in developing treatments for cancer, while our moral philosophers and theologians consider its ethical implications.

The number of authors in the natural sciences is second only to the U.S. and, Israel's per capita spending on civilian R&D is among the highest in the world.¹ Israeli scientists are experts in fighting desertification and in preserving water resources, and this expertise has helped save millions of lives around the world. Similarly, our economists are invited to take positions at leading universities around the world, as well as at the top levels of international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

In my own field, the study of diplomacy, conflict management and negotiation, we regrettably have a wealth of data on failed theories, and in this area, as well, Israeli academics are very active. Our many dialogue activities involving Jews, Moslems, Christians, Druze, and others are, in themselves, central aspects of the efforts to understand how to create a basis for tolerance and understanding, particularly in the midst of protracted ethno-national conflicts.

Joint Israeli-Palestinian research projects -- for example, in water resource management, cancer treatment, desalination, and regional disease eradication -- have continued despite five years of violence. And Palestinian academics, such as Prof. Sari Nusseibah, the president of Al Quds University, have also condemned the ideological efforts to impose a boycott on these and other activities, both on normative grounds and because this would be detrimental to the welfare of many Palestinians.

We are also at the leading edge of expertise in counter-terrorism and human rights (in the full meaning of this term), and unfortunately are becoming world leaders in studying the politics of boycotts and campaigns designed to create "exclusion zones" to the principle of academic freedom. And the costs of such "exclusion zones" would be very high.

In the social sciences and humanities, Israelis are well represented in the realist classical behavioralist approaches, as well as in post-modernism, post-colonialism, and deconstructionism. Personally, the latter approaches are not my cup of tea, and I spend a considerable amount of time in disputes on this

issue in the pages of academic journals and in the frameworks of seminars and conferences. If ideas that were unpopular with the government and leading politicians were banned, I would have no one to debate.

This is a far cry and, in many ways, the polar opposite of the claims made by the supporters of the AUT boycott, who have drawn and distorted the experience of the academic boycott of South Africa. That boycott was called in support of 2 academics jailed up by a regime that denied academic freedom, dissent or free speech in any sense of the word, and openly declared itself to be racist. The adherents to that boycott pledged that those signing it would not take up academic posts in South African universities that practiced blatant racial discrimination. (The text is still on the ANC website.)

But there is absolutely no comparison between the South African boycott movement and the campaign against Israel, other than the exploitation of language and slogans. In South Africa a White minority of less than 15% denied political rights to the rest of the population. In contrast, the State of Israel, the 20% Palestinian Arab minority are full citizens, with the franchise and their own political parties than play an active role in the functioning of the Israeli parties and the Knesset. Arabs attending Haifa University, which the AUT sought to boycott, constitute 20% of the student body, and Arab faculty members are also fairly represented. This is so far removed from the South African reality as to demean and diminish the suffering of those who were victims of the real apartheid.

Moving back from the myth to the Israeli reality, the claims made regarding the case of Ilan Pappé to justify boycott calls against Haifa University were simply nonsense, reflecting a combination of ignorance and prejudice. One can hear Pappé speak, read his publications and examine his evidence to decide whether there is academic substance in his conclusions – he is certainly not in jail. And the attempt to blame Bar Ilan University for the entire history of the Arab-Israeli conflict via the thin links to Ariel College, and to remove this one element from the much wider context, is similarly absurd, as the members of the AUT eventually realized.

If those who pressed this discriminatory and unjustified campaign were actually concerned about academic issues, and – first and foremost – academic freedom, they would have started with the cases in which the threats are most serious – such as in Syria, Egypt, or China.

Having considered the normative foundations of academic freedom, and demonstrated the gap between myth and reality in the Israeli case, I will now consider the nature of the boycott itself, and explore the reasons for its resounding repeal. (A detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this brief presentation, but indulging in a bit of self-promotion, I will note that these will be explored in more detail in the conference to be held at Bar Ilan on January 25 and 26 next year.) In particular, I will try to address the question of why the attempt to boycott Israeli universities – the modern equivalent of book burning -- received so much attention and at least initial support in the UK.

THE DURBAN STRATEGY: ABUSING APARTHEID TO DEMONIZE ISRAEL

It would be a mistake to dismiss this effort and its impact as merely the obsessive activism of a small group from the “green-red alliance” between radical Islamists and left-over Trotskyites, neither of whom put much stock in democracy, and who pursue an extremist anti-Western (specifically anti-American) and anti-Israel ideology. Clearly, for this group, values such as pluralism and academic freedom, are of little importance, and their goal is not peace and mutual understanding, but victory on an increasingly brutal the battlefield, not only in the Middle East. In this context, the academic boycott, divestment campaigns, and similar activities are a form of warfare by other means.

But, this radical alliance is only the visible tip of a wider process, based on the power of the modern orthodoxy of radical anti-democratic and anti-Israeli ideology, supported by radical governments in the Middle East with huge reserves of petroleum, and tremendous influence around the world.

This tactics that propel this process are based on the strategy that was formulated in detail at the September 2001 United Nations conference on Racism and Xenophobia, in Durban. This activity and the preparatory conferences that preceded it (including the Teheran session), as well as the post-conference events, brought together thousands of anti-Israel activists, particularly from radical Palestinian and Arab non-governmental organizations.

This highly publicized and carefully orchestrated event took place in parallel with the barrage of distorted images of the escalating violence resulting from the Palestinian suicide attacks. The central objective of this form of political warfare was to relabel Zionism as racism, after this notorious UN resolution had been repealed, and to plan the political program to advance the process of demonization and delegitimization of Israel.

As I have noted, the model that the participants proclaimed was the one that led to the downfall of the apartheid regime in South Africa. And boycotts as well as divestment campaigns are central elements in this model. Indeed, the promoters of the academic boycott campaign, as well as the parallel divestment effort continually declare their goal to be that of labeling Israel as an “apartheid” state. (Pro-Palestinian groups are quite good with labels and public relations campaigns. In the UK, the “Stop the war” Campaign morphed into the “Stop the war – free Palestine” campaign, and there are many other examples.)

In this context, it is important to note that the texts of the boycott resolutions were taken directly from the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organization (PNGO) network.² The members of PNGO, many of whom are financed by radical Arab and Islamic groups and act in the name of civil society while lacking any mandate, were very active in Durban. PNGO also co-sponsored the conference held at SOAS in December 2004 that re-launched the boycott movement. PNGO also plays a central role in the campaign for church divestment resolutions against Israel, along with specialized NGOs such as

the Sabeel “Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center”.³ The demonization of Israel is their primary and constant goal, and they have the resources to press their propaganda until it is widely accepted as factual.

It was on this basis that the AUT resolutions were pressed. However, once the evidence is examined, this claim is widely rejected as an unfounded and unacceptable, as the majority of the participants in the AUT revote demonstrated, as well as in meetings of local AUT chapters.

While views of Israeli policy differ, and many academics in Britain, as well as in Israel, are opposed to specific policies of the Israeli Government (or the British Government, I might add), the Durban model goes far beyond legitimate and constructive criticism. The abuse of universal human rights norms that routinely takes place in the UN Commission on Human Rights, including Durban, applies a separate and unique standard in the condemnation of Israel. Similarly, as John Pike has written, the claims that are made to justify the boycott of Israeli academics and universities amount to an immoral “singling out” of Israel.

While there are over 50 members of the Conference of Islamic States, and Britain is one of many countries in which Christianity is the dominant cultural framework, the idea that there should be a single state in which the Jewish culture can be maintained, Hebrew spoken, and the calendar based on the Jewish tradition, while also respecting minority rights, is somehow considered “racist”. Those who developed the Durban program, and are behind the AUT

boycott, state their goals clearly: they reject the right self-determination and sovereign equality for the Jewish people, regardless of borders.

It is this rejectionism that has fuelled the conflict since the Arab rejection of the UN partition Resolution of November 1947 (the mother of all UN resolutions on this topic), and is also propelling the boycott and divestment campaigns. In it is also behind the practice by which Israeli and Jewish students are denied the right to voice their views, intimidated by faculty at Columbia University, or to enroll as students (as in case of Andrew Wilkie's infamous private boycott at Oxford).⁴

Such partisan expressions do not promote the basis for compromise and mutual acceptance that is necessary for peace; rather, they exacerbate the conflict and the brutal violence that has accompanied it for decades. The boycott campaign is an attempt to force this radical political position on the AUT.

Informed balanced criticism of Israeli policy is certainly legitimate, both on British and Israeli universities. By the same token, informed criticisms of the policies pursued by Palestinians, Egyptians and Syrian, Indians and Pakistanis, as well as of the British, French and Americans, are also essential reflections of academic freedom.

But the ideological campaign to single-out and demonize one small county and one group is and entirely different matter. Those who apply unique and

unjustified standards in the condemnation of their favorite target must themselves be condemned. They do not seek to enhance academic freedom, but rather to limit it, and to squeeze out its essential core.

From this perspective, it should be clear that any attempt to infringe on academic freedom in order to pursue a partisan political and ideological objective is unjustified. In 2002, when the American equivalents of Sue Blackwell and Steven Rose launched an unsuccessful anti-Israel divestment campaign at a number of universities, Prof. Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard declared “Harvard is first and foremost a center of learning, not an institutional organ for advocacy on such a complex and controversial international conflict.”⁵ His words are as important on the campuses of universities in the UK as they are in the U.S.

An academic boycott against any country, like other forms of discrimination on the grounds of race, religious, sexuality, or gender, is simply unacceptable. The world makes progress towards relieving hunger, enslavement, and other forms of suffering precisely as a result of the free flow of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge. By all means, the debates and arguments should continue, and not only in one favored direction. But slamming the door on such debates through the cynical use of academic boycotts opens the door to totalitarianism, hate and a new dark age of myth and superstition.

On this moral basis, I urge the members of the NPC to continue to make their voices heard on behalf of academic freedom and the principle of equal

treatment.

The **universal** principle of academic freedom is too precious; too fragile; and too important to be prostituted and discarded in pursuit of such **particularist** political and ideological campaigns.

REFERENCES:

¹ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/Israel.pdf>

² *NGO Monitor* entry on PNGO <http://www.ngo-monitor.org/archives/infofile.htm#pngo>

³ <http://www.ngo-monitor.org/editions/v3n11/SabeelAnEcumenicalFacadeToPromoteHatred.htm>

⁴ Select Committee on Home Affairs Written Evidence, Memorandum submitted by the Union of Jewish Students, January 2005

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmhaff/165/165we38.htm>

⁵ <http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2002/israel.html> Summers also spoke out strongly against the manifestations of anti-Semitism in the radical anti-Israel campaigns, including boycott efforts. See Lawrence Summers, Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Cambridge, Mass., September 17, 2002
<http://www.hillel.org/Hillel/NewHille.nsf/0/039D27FB094E07B385256C3E00734215?OpenDocument>