

You deserve a factual look at . . .

BDS, Academic Freedom and Anti-Semitism

Academic boycotts of Israel advocated by BDS supporters not only strangle free expression, they also deny Jewish self-determination.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions-sponsored boycotts of Israeli academic institutions tarnish the integrity of any school that stands for academic freedom—the open-minded, tolerant exchange of ideas. Worse, BDS couches its arguments against Israel in half-truths and lies meant to delegitimize the Jewish state.

What are the facts?

Academic freedom is a noble-spirited ideal at the heart of American higher education. Academic freedom thrives on the respectful exchange of ideas in search of truth—even among people who passionately disagree. As such, it depends on unfettered communications that span national, linguistic and ideological borders. Conversely, anyone who attempts to limit the access of the academic community to ideas, research or scholars, no matter their origin or beliefs, is guilty of trampling this precious privilege.

Indeed, the strategies and tactics of the BDS movement have just such a subversive effect on academic freedom. BDS supporters attempt to disrupt speakers with whom they disagree, support their arguments with outright falsehoods, and seek to blacklist innocent Israeli academics because of their nationality. Finally, most egregiously, BDS uses a double standard to single out Israel among all the nations for recrimination.

Does academic freedom support censoring opinions we don't like? BDS advocates have shouted down speeches by the Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert, Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren, Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz and others, and they routinely disrupt fellow students at Holocaust Memorial and pro-Israel events on campus. Yet preventing speakers from delivering their messages not only violates the tolerant, respectful spirit of academic freedom, it also violates our core First Amendment guarantees of free speech.

Does academic freedom support telling lies or half-truths to argue our point? Under the guise of human rights rhetoric calling for “liberation” of the Palestinian people and an end to Israeli “occupation,” BDS proponents recite a litany of alleged Israeli crimes. Perhaps most outrageously, they accuse the Jewish state of apartheid—a bald lie that bears no relationship to the full democratic rights enjoyed by Israel’s Arab citizens or even to Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza. Likewise, to accuse Israel of “occupation” without mentioning that Israel has been the Jewish homeland for some 3,000 years—or the Palestinian suicide bombers and nearly daily rocket attacks meant to destroy the Jewish state—is

intellectually dishonest. While free speech allows anyone to lie, such outright mendacity discredits the worthy tradition of academic freedom.

Does academic freedom support severing our schools from international research and scholarly thought? BDS advocates an academic boycott of Israeli universities and, effectively, of scholars who teach and conduct groundbreaking work there, especially in medicine, the arts and information technology. By boycotting Israeli students and teachers, we deprive our own institutions of the kind of open collaboration that is key to academic freedom. What’s more, to punish Israeli academics with pariah status simply because of their nationality, regardless of their political views, is unconscionable.

“When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You’re talking anti-Semitism.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

BDS’s use of double-standards, demonization and delegitimization against Israel is anti-Semitic. BDS advocates are quick to assert that “I’m not anti-Semitic, I’m just anti-Zionist.” While academic freedom allows everyone to criticize Israel, one also is free to criticize Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia or the United States. But BDS does not simply criticize Israel—it criticizes *only* Israel, and moreover it demonizes the Jewish state, calling it a Nazi regime and a slaughterer of children. It attempts to delegitimize Israel, claiming it is occupying Arab territory, thus denying the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. As Martin Luther King, Jr. has noted, “When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You’re talking anti-Semitism.” Indeed to single out Israel among all nations for a boycott is a double-standard . . . and that is, according to the U.S. State Department, anti-Semitism.

What do the BDS leaders really want? While the U.S., Western European nations, Israel and the U.N. Security Council have embraced a “two-state solution” as the basis for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, BDS leaders, like Ali Abuminah, argue for a one-state solution in which Arabs outnumber Jews. When BDS talks about occupation, it refers not to disputed West Bank territories, but to all of Israel. BDS has consistently opposed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, calling them “collaborationist.” No wonder BDS founder Omar Barghouti admits, “If the occupation ends . . . would that end support for BDS? No, it wouldn’t—no.”

If you support a robust atmosphere of academic freedom, in which all sides are heard and positions are vigorously debated, you must oppose BDS’s call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel. In fact, BDS actions flatly contradict academic freedom, and its insistence on denying the self-determination of the Jewish people in Israel is overtly anti-Semitic.

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