

British Boycott of Israeli Academia - June 2007 **Raphael Cohen-Almagor**

British academics voted in favour of an academic boycott of Israel on May 30, 2007 to protest what they termed "Israeli academics' cooperation with Israeli government's policies that harm Palestinians". Delegates at the University and College Union conference in Bournemouth voted 158 in favour of the boycott, with 99 opposing and eight abstentions.

The boycott shameful motion "notes that Israel's 40-year occupation has seriously damaged the fabric of Palestinian society through annexation, illegal settlement, collective punishment and restriction of movement, deplores the denial of educational rights for Palestinians by invasions, closures, checkpoints, curfews, and shootings and arrests of teachers, lecturers and students." It condemned "the complicity of Israeli academia in the occupation, which has provoked a call from Palestinian trade unions for a comprehensive and consistent international boycott of all Israeli academic institutions," adding that "in these circumstances passivity or neutrality is unacceptable and criticism of Israel cannot be construed as anti-Semitic."

The resolution instructs British academics to "circulate the full text of the Palestinian boycott call to all branches," and to "encourage members to consider the moral implications of existing and proposed links with Israeli academic institutions." It also called on its members to "organize a UK-wide campus tour for Palestinian academic/educational trade unionists."

Zvi Hefetz, Israel's ambassador to London, commented that "A stench of ignorance arises from the one-sided formula and unbalanced language of the decision". I tend to agree. Hefetz also pointed out the fact that during the discussion, a proposal was made, and rejected, that the resolution also condemns anti-Semitism. The ambassador said this fact strengthened his feeling that the ignorance shown by those proposing the boycott was also tinged with anti-Semitism.

Education Minister Yutli Tamir (who did her D.Phil. at Oxford) said that the decision was outrageous, adding Israel would work to defuse it through cooperation with England's prominent universities, "which have never approved of academic boycotts".

A few weeks ago I had a discussion with a lecturer from Brighton University, who appeared to endorse the motion. He thought that Israeli academia is much involved in the life of the nation, and could exert influence on the government to change its policies. I said that Israeli academia has influence on the Israeli government to the same extent that the British academia has influence on the British government. I said that most of the Israeli academia objects the occupation, and many people do it publicly, without a shadow of doubt. Readers of my blog <http://almagor.blogspot.com> can testify that I have been objecting the occupation for many years.

Indeed, I spoke against the occupation since 1985, with little success or impact on Israeli governments through the years to cease the occupation. I endorse the motion language on the evils of occupation. I don't see how boycotting the Israeli academia is going to make the Israeli government change its policies.

The Brighton lecturer, Bob, suggested that all presidents and rectors of Israeli universities sign a petition denouncing the occupation. I said this will not and cannot be done. First, political views are private. All citizens are entitled to keep their political opinions to themselves, if they so desire. This is why people vote behind curtain. Even presidents and rectors are entitled to some privacy. Second, I would assume that as people, presidents and rectors included, disagree on almost anything, they would also disagree on this issue. You cannot expect unanimity of opinions. Third, it seems that Bob is putting too much weight on what presidents and rectors think, as if people actually care. I really do not think that the Israeli government will be convinced to change its policies on the occupation because of such petition. Lastly, from prudential reasons presidents and rectors cannot do this, as university budgets are very much dependent on the government. They would not like to shoot themselves in the leg, or higher. The last few governments, from 2001 onwards, had cut universities' budgets by 20 percent, and I don't think the Olmert government will go out of its way to guarantee a no-further-cut policy.

The Israeli academia, together with Israeli artists, is the most vocal voice against the occupation. Boycotting the academia will not stop the occupation. If at all, it would help to silence voices against the occupation. Those who push forward this motion simply do not know the Israeli scene. The occupation should be stopped, sooner the better, but there are other ways to sway the Israeli government to change its policies. This one disserves the purpose.

Moreover, I have already mentioned on <http://almagor.blogspot.com> that Olmert came to power with an explicit agenda of ending the occupation and bring an end to the conflict by establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Amir Peretz was the perfect partner for such a plan. However, when the Palestinian opt for violence and answer with suicide murderers and Kassam rockets, no sane prime minister will simply give away territories, knowing that this step might subject the entire country to the Kassams. If the British academia really wants to enter into these muddy waters of Middle Eastern politics, it should prepare its homework first, study the situation, and then seek ways to end the prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I am sorry to say there are no easy short-cuts. This bloody conflict is complex and complicated. It deserves careful attention, and not a quick wide-brush decision to ban those who work hard to install peace and tranquility in the region. It is counter-productive and smells bad. British academia has a leading role in the world, and some of its scholars are simply the best. They are capable to devise far better ways to promote a peaceful agenda for the Middle East.