

Anti-Israel Boycotts: A British Disease

Gerald Steinberg

The vote on yet another anti-Israel boycott resolution by a British trade-union — this time by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) — is scheduled to take place at the end of May. Beyond the obvious violations of the academic process inherent in a political and ideological boycott, this effort is part of a carefully prepared strategy aimed at isolating the Jewish state.

While genocide is taking place in Darfur, bitter conflicts rage in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, Russia has destroyed Chechnya and basic human rights are denied in the dictatorships from Libya through Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, democratic Israel alone is singled out for this dubious attention.

The leaders of these boycott efforts are all obsessive anti-Israel crusaders who use deadly “soft power” and the distorted rhetoric of universal human rights. Armed with intense passion and direct access to the media, marginal British academics such as Hillary and Steven Rose, and Sue Blackwell have single-mindedly pursued the academic boycott of Israel.

In parallel, Rev. Stephen Sizer (who also promotes replacement theology, or supersessionism) has pushed divestment and boycotts in the Anglican Church, while Derek Summerfield has spent years pursuing anti-Israel policies in British medical circles, most recently leading a “boycott Israel” campaign in the World Medical Association. And in April, a hard-core group passed a boycott motion in the National Union of Journalists.

The rhetoric of this warfare invokes terms such as “apartheid” and “racist” to demonize Israel, and strips away the environment of Palestinian terror and warfare. It is Israel’s existence that is rejected, and not specific policies.

On their own, this small group of individuals would remain on the fringe, but their impact is magnified by powerful nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Britain that have been campaigning against Israel for years. Well-financed “charities” such as War on Want, Christian Aid, World Vision, Pax Christi, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch take the lead in singling out the Jewish state and applying unique criteria that systematically condemn Israel.

The strategy was articulated in the NGO Forum of the Durban conference that took place in September 2001, when representatives from 1,500 groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, adopted a strategy of boycotts and political action aimed at demonizing Israel. Going far beyond legitimate criticism, they promote a narrative focusing on Palestinian suffering and erasing Israel’s tiny size, which leaves it vulnerable to attack. Their invented histories claim that Israel was “founded in sin,” and numerous human rights reports use invented evidence to condemn Israeli responses to terror and aggression.

This rhetoric has reinforced traditional British anti-Semitism and Muslim racism to feed the hatred of Israel, while other trade union leaders, who know little about Israel or the Palestinians, accept the agendas of the activists.

Having heard so much about Israeli “disproportionate response” after its soldiers were kidnapped and killed by Hezbollah and Hamas, and about the “apartheid wall” (as opposed to a security barrier that has prevented untold attacks by Palestinian suicide bombers), members of the union leadership rarely question the attacks against Israel.

In 2006, however, the rank-and-file membership, which is usually passive in union affairs, woke up to stop abuse of their organizations for radical ideological agendas. The members of the Association of University Teachers forced a second vote on the boycott motions, which resulted in a reversal. They realized that such a partisan and wrong-headed boycott was antithetical to the principles of academic freedom. (A similar re-vote in the case of a second union – NAFTHE – was avoided when this group dissolved in a merger with the AUT to become the UCU).

In the Anglican Church, a majority of the leaders overturned the attempt to become involved in a

one-sided and counterproductive political attack. More recently, many members of the National Union of Journalists were embarrassed by the obvious pro-Palestinian bias formally adopted by their organization, which showed that British media coverage of the Middle East was systematically biased. They are demanding a re-vote and repeal.

Most tragically, these boycott campaigns also fuel the conflict by providing the radical Palestinian and Arab leaders with a false hope that time is on their side and that Israel will be defeated through political isolation. For Israelis, including those on the left, the continuous stream of one-sided condemnations reinforces the perception that the international community, and Britain in particular, is hopelessly prejudiced. For those who vote for or acquiesce to yet another boycott motion, these are the only results that they will be able to claim.

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