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BOYCOTTING THE JEWS

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The phones began ringing late last Friday afternoon. The BBC, AFP, co-authors, my mother: everyone wanted to know if I was worried about the vote by British academics to boycott my university. As a Jew and an Israeli, my automatic answer to any question that contains the word worry is yes. On the long list, the boycott comes close behind the dangers of Palestinian terror, the Iranian bomb, Hezbollah's missiles, Osama bin Laden, reality TV, Israeli taxi drivers, and the waves of locusts migrating from North Africa.

In truth, the direct impact of unspecified academic sanctions adopted by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) against the faculty at Bar Ilan and Haifa universities is likely to be minimal. The few viscerally anti-Israel academics are probably not participating in any joint research projects in any case, to their loss. Two years ago, my colleague Prof. Miriam Shlesinger, an internationally prominent linguist, was ousted from the board of a journal in translation studies by an Egyptian-born editor based in the University of Manchester. And the politically correct anti-Israel atmosphere has probably led a few anonymous reviewers to reject research reports submitted to other academic journals - but this is hard to prove.

In any case, the quality of the Israeli academic research is generally very high, and good work still trumps bad politics, even in the nonsense of post-colonial, post-modern and post-Chomsky/Said theory. In molecular biology, immunology, anti-terror methodologies, strategic deterrence, and other fields, a political ban on Israelis would be particularly costly for the banners - not for the banned. And efforts to understand the factors that distinguish between failure and success in arms control and peace efforts (my research focus) will be stillborn without the active participation of serious Israeli researchers in this field.

At the same time, this effort to impose a political litmus test on academic research has created a serious backlash. Since the recent revival of the boycott campaign, we have been deluged by emails from colleagues pledging to defy the policy, and to increase their contact with Israelis. Many also reject the medieval nature of such censorship, which contradicts the core principle of the marketplace of ideas.

The real threat from the boycott, as its authors realize, is not from the direct academic impact, but rather from its broader political objectives. Although the official terminology refers to occupation and settlements, and singles out two universities for their alleged complicity, the Israel-obsessed organizers of the AUT boycott - Susan Blackwell and Steven Rose, like their counterparts elsewhere - readily admit that this is simply a tactical decision. They have declared all Israelis who serve in the defense forces and support the government to be guilty. Bar Ilan and Haifa Universities were targeted after a blanket boycott resolution against all Israeli academics failed to get a majority two years ago. The union targeted Haifa because it said the university was threatening to fire an Israeli political science lecturer for supporting a student's research into allegations of killings by Israeli troops. Bar Ilan was sanctioned for its alleged links to the College of Judea and Samaria, located in the Jewish settlement of Ariel in the West Bank. A proposal to ban Hebrew University was referred to the unions executive committee. If examined closely, all the charges are inaccurate and transparently intended to serve a different goal--in Ms. Blackwell's words, to condemn the "illegitimate state of Israel" and to send a message of support to Palestinians.

The boycott is only a small part of the broader political war against Israel's legitimacy as a sovereign Jewish state, and the effort to label Israel as the next apartheid regime is designed to put an end to Zionism. The use of the apartheid label does a gross injustice to those who suffered under the real thing, and is a form of modern anti-Semitism, this time turning the Jewish state into the devil. The absurdly exaggerated condemnation of Israel, and the systematic removal of the environment of terror in the rhetoric of war crimes and ethnic cleansing is the political counterpart of the ongoing terrorism and military assaults. Major battles of this political war have taken place in the U.N. -- the 1975 Zionism is racism resolution, for example, or the 2001 Durban conference on racism where that claim was repeated on campuses such as Columbia University in New York, in the newsrooms of the BBC and CNN, and via the non-governmental superpowers such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

After the death of Yasser Arafat and the relative calm on the ground, reflecting the exhaustion of both Israelis and Palestinians, this political war has heated up, particularly in Britain. Christian Aid, a powerful group that uses its charitable status for promoting a blatant ideological agenda, ran its massive Christmas appeal around the theme of Bethlehem's Child. This campaign featured the stereotypes of Israeli aggression and Palestinian victimization, in which the context of terror had been erased. Similarly, London-based Amnesty International issued a barrage of such reports, including one purporting to focus on the status of Palestinian women, in which Israel was blamed for violent attacks by Arab men against their wives and daughters. And Human Rights Watch, another NGO that competes with Amnesty in exploiting human rights in the war against Israel, is also active in the boycott campaign. Together, they contributed to building the environment for adoption of the AUT boycott.

So perhaps I am being too clever in dismissing the AUT's effort to launch a boycott of my university. For decades, the propaganda war has always accompanied and served to justify the shooting war. If the anti-Israel forces on campuses and in NGOs are gaining strength in Britain, Europe and the U.S., this will undermine the current efforts to expand the cease-fire and conflict management activities in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah and Gaza. And this is the real tragedy of the AUT boycott decision while talking about peace, its backers are actually contributing to war and hatred.

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