

Britain's Obsessive Boycotters

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While Israelis are targeted by rockets from Gaza and officials from the "elected Palestinian government" threaten attacks by female suicide bombers, calls for anti-Israeli boycotts based on human rights claims would appear to be both immoral and absurd.

But the small group that controls Britain's trade unions has managed to combine both traits, and it is escalating its political warfare in parallel with Palestinian violence. A vote on yet another anti-Israel boycott proposal is scheduled to take place at the end of May, this time by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU).

This is the third such academic boycott campaign in Britain in two years, coming after a divestment debate within the Anglican Church, a "boycott Israel" movement led by British activists in the World Medical Association, and the adoption of a similar program by the National Union of Journalists. Beyond the obvious violations of the academic process inherent in a political boycott, this effort is part of a carefully prepared strategy aimed at isolating the Jewish state.

The crucial difference, however, between the previous attempts and the current boycott battles, including the UCU effort, is the presence of a serious counterweight on the political battlefield to challenge the anti-Israel and often anti-Semitic slogans and myths.

Sober and morally-minded British academics on the Left, led by a group known as Engage, as well as the "Fair Play Campaign Group," are particularly active. And under the IAB (International Advisory Board for Academic Freedom), many Israeli academics have also become active in countering the pervasive propaganda and misinformation.

FOR THE radicals, including obsessive ideologues affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party, history, facts and details are irrelevant. While always invoking "the occupation," the decades of Arab warfare, terrorism, incitement and rejectionism are erased from the record. This is not the result of ignorance but of willful conviction, and nothing will change their anti-Israel, anti-US and anti-democracy agendas. They will continue to use terms such as "apartheid" and "racist" to demonize Israel.

As made clear in recent statements, it is Israel's existence that they reject, and not specific policies.

However, the main purpose of the confrontations between boycott opponents and advocates is not to convince the fanatics, but to address the much larger group that knows very little about Israel and the conflict. After many years of avoidance, in the false hope that the absurdity of these boycotts against Israel would become obvious, there is now a coherent strategy that has a chance of success.

Via vigorous debate, the goal is to encourage those who are not obsessed by Israel to break with the radicals. In trade union votes, these moderate voices will determine the outcome, and persuading many of the injustice inherent in the one-sided singling-out of Israel can defeat the boycott resolutions.

This is a formidable task. The impact of the radical fringe has been greatly magnified by powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Britain that have also been campaigning for years. Well-financed pressure groups such as War on Want, Christian Aid, World Vision, Pax Christi, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch take the lead in singling out and systematically condemning Israel. They repeat the same invented histories, claiming that Israel was "founded in sin," and use invented evidence to condemn Israeli responses to terrorism and aggression. Many journalists who share these prejudices repeat the claims at face value.

AS A result, those who know little about Israel or the Palestinians accept the agendas of the activists. Having heard so much about Israeli "disproportionate response" against attacks from Hizbullah 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 who focus on other issues accept the attacks against Israel.

There is evidence that some members of this group are beginning to question the obsessive anti-Israel propaganda. In 2005, after the leaders of the Association of University Teachers voted to endorse the boycott, members forced a second vote, which resulted in a reversal. They realized that a partisan boycott was unjust and antithetical to the principles of academic freedom. (A similar re-vote in the case of a second union - NATFHE - was avoided when this group dissolved in a merger with the AUT to become the UCU).

In the Anglican Church, in which the politics resembles the trade union movement, 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 are demanding a revote after being 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.

These changes, while relatively small, demonstrate that attempts to demonize and boycott Israel are not inevitable, and that the inherently immoral and absurd nature of such campaigns can be exposed.

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