



THE MEANING OF THE UK CAMPAIGN FOR AN ACADEMIC BOYCOTT OF ISRAEL

By Jonathan Rynhold*

The campaign for an academic boycott of Israel is symptomatic of a wider campaign by the extreme Left to delegitimize the State of Israel. Although the extreme Left is a marginal political force in the UK, the boycott campaign gained significant purchase in the much larger moderate Left by blurring its ideological foundations. While the moderate Left is also hostile to Israel, it is possible to counter the boycott campaign successfully by framing Israel's case in broadly liberal terms that appeal to the moderate Blairite Left and center-Right, while exposing the ideological gulf between moderates and the extreme Left.

INTRODUCTION

What does the academic boycott of Israel by trade unions representing British academics tell about British attitudes to Israel and the Middle East?

Many Israelis and American Jews tend to view it as classical antisemitism. Sometimes they generalize, assuming that this was a reflection of a general disposition in Britain toward antisemitism. Others tend to dismiss the boycott campaign as the ranting of a small and insignificant minority; while the boycott campaigners and their sympathizers tried to present their actions as legitimate criticism of Israel. However, these are all misperceptions.

The boycott campaign was driven by a small cadre of extreme Left anti-Zionist activists. While not driven by classical antisemitism or hostility to Jews per se, their approach often gave expression to the New Antisemitism, which discriminates against, and demonizes, the Jewish State: Israel, and by extension Jews politically supportive of Israel. Although their underlying ideology lacks significant appeal in the UK, they were able to leverage their power by gaining control over the policy of trade unions with hundreds of thousands of members. Outside the trade union movement, they gained a significant amount of sympathy on the moderate Left and have contributed to shifting the boundaries of

legitimate debate in the UK regarding Israel and the Middle East. While the movement has not succeeded in sustaining an academic boycott of Israel, it would be a mistake to dismiss it as politically irrelevant.

THE ACADEMIC BOYCOTT CAMPAIGN: A CHRONOLOGY

April 2002: British lecturers Stephen and Hilary Rose's petition in the *Guardian* calls for a halt on European research collaboration with Israel. To lead the boycott campaign they set up the British Campaign for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP, <http://www.bricup.org.uk/>) and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI, <http://www.pacbi.org/>).

May 2002: Mona Baker of the University of Manchester Institute for Science and Technology (UMIST) fires Israeli academics, Miriam Shlesinger and Gideon Toury from the editorial board of her journals, because they are Israeli.

May 2003: A motion at the Association of University Teachers (AUT) Council proposes a full academic boycott of official Israeli institutions, including universities. The motion

is defeated.

April 2005: The AUT decides to boycott two Israeli universities.

May 2005: AUT Special Council meeting reverses the decision. This meeting has much better attendance than any routine council meeting.

May 2006: The larger academic trade union National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) votes for a motion at its conference, three days before it merges with AUT, to boycott Israeli academics who don't "publicly dissociate themselves" from "Israel's apartheid policies." The policy lapses with the dissolution of NATFHE.

May 2007: First Congress of the new =University & College Union (UCU). New pro-boycott motions passed.

September 2007: The UCU cancels the implementation of the new pro-boycott resolutions, after receiving legal advice that the motions were in contravention of British anti-discrimination legislation.

May 2008: The UCU ignores its own legal advice and passes more pro-boycott resolutions, but they are not implemented

THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ROOTS OF THE ACADEMIC BOYCOTT

The ideological roots of the boycott movement lie within the extreme Left of British politics. After the Six Day War, Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda greatly intensified, incorporating classical antisemitic motifs. Although, the New Left viewed itself as independent of Moscow, Soviet language found an echo in the pronouncements of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, which demonized Zionism as "racist" and "colonialist." In fact, the SWP went further than Moscow by denying the State of Israel's right to exist. For the New Left, the Third

World was the new working class, and Israel--allied with the United States--was on the wrong side of the global class struggle. Against this background, Fatah, which rejected Israel's right to exist and carried out terrorist attacks against its citizens, was lionized alongside the Vietcong and Che Guevara as the model for "popular resistance." In this postcolonial ideology, Israel was presented as one of the last living examples of colonialism, as all European empires had dissolved by the mid 1970s, the very time at which the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) infamously declared Zionism to be racism.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, extreme Left anti-Israel activity was focused on British university campuses. Against the background of the UNGA vote, the SWP campaigned to get university Jewish societies banned on the basis that Jewish societies declared themselves to be Zionist. Many of the student activists who fought on both sides of the issue later went on to play leading roles regarding the academic boycott. With the onset of the Middle East peace process in the 1990s extreme left anti-Zionist activity waned, only to explode with unprecedented vigor after the peace process collapsed in 2000.

THE BOYCOTTERS' STRATEGY

The boycott campaign was very much anti-Israeli rather than pro-Palestinian. It was not interested in providing practical support for Palestinian academics. Rather it sought to demonize and ultimately delegitimize the State of Israel as an "apartheid state." Although connected to the wider campaign of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), the thrust of the campaign came from within Britain, not from the Palestinians.

The boycotters understood that even most critics of Israeli policy in the UK did not share their extreme ideological agenda. Consequently, they sought to garner support by blurring their ideology and tying buzz words like apartheid to policies that were generally unpopular with the moderate Left in

Britain, such as Israeli road blocks, settlements, and the targeted killing of “militants.” They portrayed the conflict, in one-sided terms, with Israel as powerful “colonial” bully and the Palestinians as the innocent victims. The fact that British public opinion and important liberal-Left media outlets such as the BBC, the *Guardian*, and the *Independent* generally portrayed Israel as to blame for conflict created a supportive environment for the more radical view. Moreover, within these media outlets there were people of influence who were sympathetic to the more radical anti-Zionist agenda of the extreme Left.

Another rhetorical tactic used by the boycotters to blur the distinction between themselves and the moderate Left was to dismiss those who argued that the demonization of Israel and denial of its right to exist is antisemitic by proclaiming that the charge of antisemitism was just a ploy to prevent their own “legitimate” criticism of Israel. One pro-boycott resolution even went so far as to declare that criticism of Israel *cannot* be antisemitic. Despite being utterly false in regard to the anti-boycott campaign--among whose leaders were a significant number who had been publicly critical of various Israeli policies in the past--this charge had traction across a larger slice of what is known in Britain as the “chattering classes” (i.e. the educated and politically aware segment of the population). Indeed, on the basis of private polling, the British Jewish community and leading Israeli activists active in the anti-boycott campaign decided not to use the word “antisemitism,” but refer to “discrimination” instead.

THE ANTI-BOYCOTT CAMPAIGN

The fight against the academic boycott was led within the union by the *Engage* movement made up of moderate Left academics--many Jewish--which was created for this very purpose. These were people who were angry at the extreme Left for demonizing democratic Israel and sympathizing with--or apologizing for-- Hamas and Hizballah. The British Jewish

community also played a leading role, while American Jewish organizations were active in the background. Also active were Israeli academics on the International Advisory Board for Academic Freedom (IAB), including ex-patriot Brits, like this author and Professor David Newman.

The strategy of the anti-boycott movement was to highlight the radical elements of the boycott agenda that were out of kilter with the more mainstream liberal discourse, while arguing that the boycott was bad for peace. In this vein, there were several arguments that helped shift liberal Left opinion against the boycott. The first was that it contradicted academic freedom. Thus, a clause in one of the motions that exempted those who shared the political opinions of the drafters from the boycott was deemed “McCarthyite” by the *Guardian*. Meanwhile, the fact that Peace Now and several Nobel peace prize winners came out against the boycott helped shore up the case that the boycott was bad for peace; the focus should instead be on Israeli-Palestinian academic cooperation, it was argued. The personal case of Prof. Miriam Schlesinger had a clear impact on a group of journalists from left-leaning British newspapers visiting Israel. Prof. Schlesinger was the first Israeli academic to be publicly boycotted. She was also a long time peace activist and a former member chair of Amnesty International in Israel. Prof Schlesinger's involvement in the anti-boycott campaign provided a symbol which embodied perfectly the case against the boycott.

Although the anti-boycott campaign succeeded in largely winning the public argument on the issue while also reversing the first decision in favor of an academic boycott, it subsequently found itself at a consistent political disadvantage within the trade union structure. Ultimately, it was neither the support of the government, nor that of the media and public opinion that prevented the enactment of a boycott but rather the threat of legal action, as the union received legal advice that if implemented the boycott would be counter to British antidiscrimination legislation. Yet, while an actual formal

academic boycott has not been implemented, the boycott campaign to delegitimize Israel continues. Other trade unions are also still very active on the issue. Thus, in May 2010, the largest trade union in the UK, Unite, passed a resolution in favor of boycotting Israel.

WHY ISRAEL, WHY BRITAIN?

There are two questions that are often asked in regard to the boycott campaign. First, why focus on Israel? After all, Israel is not even close to being among the worst abusers of human rights in the world, and the Second Intifada and even the Arab-Israeli conflict overall have not been among the most bloody conflicts in the world or even in the Middle East. The second question is why is the boycott campaign focused in the UK? After all, in terms of popular attitudes, the Spanish and Polish publics exhibit far higher levels of traditional antisemitism, so why Israel?

It is part ideology and part politics. Ideologically, as explained above, the extreme Left is deeply opposed to Israel's existence. In this vein, Sue Blackwell, who put forward the first boycott resolution that passed in the AUT, referred to the "illegitimate State of Israel." However, the question remains as to why a group of people with no direct connection to the conflict would make it their focus--and here, both politics and, to a lesser extent, psychology come into play.

Starting with psychology, there is a Jewish factor at work here. As has been noted in a more general historical sense, part of the reason the extreme Left denied legitimacy to the Jewish national movement, while viewing positively the national movement of every other oppressed minority, was because many of the founding socialist or communist leaders were Jewish. How could they justify their revolutionary internationalism, which rejected Jewish nationalism, if Zionism was actually a progressive force? In the contemporary boycott movement several leading figures, linked to the SWP, had a Jewish background, notably Stephen Rose. In contrast to dovish liberal Jewish groups that support Israel, while

being critical of some of its policies, the Jewish boycotters had no ties to the organized Jewish community. For such people, Israel was not only an ideological issue, it was a personal issue--one that appeared to make them feel uncomfortable in their social milieu, by potentially implicating them with the most politically incorrect state in the world. As one close observer of Jewish boycott activists put it, "The academic boycott of Israel made them able to feel proud of the fact that they were embarrassed about being Jewish."

Still, it would be a mistake to make too much of the Jewish psychological factor. The boycott movement was not predominantly Jewish nor was it part of Jewish communal politics. Identifying British Jews of virtually all religious and political stripes were strongly opposed to the boycott and even outraged by it.

More important than the resonance of Israel for anti-Zionist Jews was the much wider resonance of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Britain. It is this resonance that makes focusing on Israeli politically attractive. When this author challenged Sue Blackwell and her band of boycotters that their singling out of Israel for special punishment was a form of discrimination, they responded, "No one listens to us when we talk about Colombia." In fact, the union had once boycotted Colombia. Still, there was something revealing about that comment. The fact is that many of the other issues that had given the extreme Left a wide public platform had become defunct. The miners strike in the 1980s ended in a crushing defeat for the Left. With the end of the Cold War, the once hip and popular Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) waned, while the end of apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s removed another popular cause that the extreme Left had sought to lever for political gain.

In contrast, after 2000, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated and received enormous media coverage. Not only that, but British public opinion in the wake of the Second Intifada was clearly anti-Israeli. A large chunk of that negativity regarding Israel was on the moderate Left, the main target

audience for extreme Left campaigns to broaden their support. In other words, making a high profile symbolic stand on Israel and Palestine could not only get one noticed, it could potentially garner sympathy. Moreover, in the wake of September 11 and the Iraq War, it had the advantage of being able to be tied to two other big media stories by making vacuous claims, given serious play in the wider media, that "neoconservative Zionists" were behind the Iraq War in order to divert attention from Palestine and that British Muslim suicide bombers were driven to murderous violence primarily by "rage" over Palestine.

The political rationale for focusing on Israel hints at a major reason the boycott movement is so strong in Britain. The reason the extreme Left requires a *cause célèbre* is because of its almost complete marginalization from parliamentary politics. Under proportional representation a small party might get three percent of the national vote and gain enough seats to hold the balance of power, as in Israel. However, under the UK system, such votes garner no parliamentary representation unless they constitute a majority within a geographic constituency. As such, the "first past the post" constituency electoral system effectively blocks small ideological parties, whose supporters are not generally geographically concentrated, from gaining representation.

Unlike, in other European countries where far-left parties had representation and had real constituents' interests to represent, the SWP was largely unconstrained by such trifles.

This situation also meant they had to focus on extra-parliamentary political outlets. In the 1970s and 1980s, they had tried taking over the Labour Party from the inside, but they were eventually defeated, as Labour turned towards the center, eventually choosing Tony Blair as leader. This shifted the focus of extreme Left political activism back toward one of its traditional homes, the trade union movement. Traditional extreme Left activism in the trade unions had been based on industrial disputes concerning pay, conditions, and job cuts. However, the decline of

traditional British industries and Margaret Thatcher's defeat of the miners and enactment of anti-union legislation saw the decline in industrial action and its political significance. This in turn, made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more attractive in relative terms. Thus, once the academic boycott campaign got underway, numerous other trade unions debated and passed boycott resolutions, including the journalists union and Britain's two largest unions with over 2 million members combined, the public services union UNISON and the Transport and General Workers Union.

The overwhelming majority of the members of such unions have no interest in Israel and the Palestinians or indeed any other foreign policy issue. However, the low level of membership activism inside these unions often allows dedicated extreme minorities to gain much greater power than their small numbers actually warrant, providing them with a political launching pad in lieu of parliament.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOYCOTT CAMPAIGN: MAINSTREAMING DEMONIZATION?

At first glance, one could argue that the boycott campaign lacks political significance. No noteworthy boycott has actually been implemented. The Labour government opposed the boycott in principle, while also sensing behind the campaign the hand of its old political nemesis--the extreme Left--which had consigned it to the political wilderness for almost 20 years. The other major political parties also opposed the boycott. All the major national newspapers opposed the boycott; although the *Independent* initially supported the move, it changed its position to opposition as well. The universities themselves tried to stay out of it, but they were eventually drawn into public opposition by--among other things--the fear of American divestment in a show of solidarity with Israel.

As for the "average Brit," the issue was not really on their radar, but a sense of the lower middle class outlook can be gleaned from the following story. As part of the anti-boycott

campaign, this author was part of a delegation that debated the boycotters in the back room of a pub next to Birmingham University. As always, the delegation scrupulously avoided using the charge of antisemitism. Nonetheless, at the end of the debate when the members of the delegation went to pay the pub owner, who had been listening in, he said: "I don't want your money--those people are a bunch of antisemites!"

This is far from the whole story. The editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* told this author at the time of the first boycott that they had never received more mail on any subject and that at the least a large minority supported the boycott. More generally, among the young educated liberal-left in Britain, Israel is especially unpopular. Israel is implicitly viewed as the paradigm of political incorrectness. Israel's robust sense of national identity grounding in ethnic and religious ties, coupled with its heavy reliance on the use of force to defend itself, make it stand in opposition to what is considered "progressive" by the moderate Left.

Israeli liberals might respond that the Middle East is a tough place and that Israel has little choice. This conception, however, does not fit with the implicit outlook of the liberal Left, which tends to view Israel as the powerful actor imposing colonial-style settlements on the weak, hapless Palestinian victims--a kind of soft version of postcolonialism. Whereas in the United States, an appeal to Israel's democratic values compared to its authoritarian and extremist Arab neighbors has significant purchase on the moderate Left, in the UK, this cohort privileges "the occupation," a fact which leads them to discount and question Israel's democratic character. Although this outlook is far less anti-Israel than that of the boycotters, it too frames the conflict in a very one-sided way. Extremist ideologies and behavior by Israel's enemies are ignored, discounted, or explained away as superficial phenomenon that will dissipate when Israel withdraws. "If only Israel were to end the occupation, then peace and justice would follow," or so they say.

This cohort may not represent the "average Brit," but it is more important and active in political and economic terms. The boycott shifted the discourse about Israel among this cohort in the direction of delegitimization. People may not have actually supported the boycott, but they thought it was legitimate to promote the idea, and people who did promote the boycott were not viewed as beyond the pale. Thus, prior to one vote, the *Guardian* dedicated a half a page for the boycott and half a page against it. While the British Medical Journal (BMJ) held an online vote, a significant minority--about 25 percent--supported the boycott.

Some of the language used by the boycotters is playing an increasing role in shaping the liberal-Left and even centrist discourse. People speak for and against a "one state solution," as if a "one state solution" in which Israel ceases to exist and is replaced by the twenty-third Arab-Muslim state is somehow a legitimate stance. Instead of talking about the legitimacy of *debating* Israeli and Palestinian actions and policies, the boycotters succeeded in implicitly reinforcing the notion that the focus should be on Israel's actions, which should be criticized *de rigueur*, with only the degree of opprobrium up for debate. Indeed, even anti-boycott campaigners often prefaced their argument with a statement about how they were critical of Israeli policies. Finally, in terms of defining the desired outcome in the Middle East, one often finds that the one-sided concept of "ending the occupation" has gained superiority in the discourse over the more neutral concept of "two states living side by side in peace and security."

The boycott campaign is significant not because of its immediate political effects, but because it has helped to shift the discourse about Israel in negative ways that could later on down the road inform and legitimize real political acts of BDS that can threaten a country like Israel whose economic welfare and diplomatic standing is highly dependent on trade with--and support from--Western democracies. Britain alone is not critical, but the threat is that it could spread elsewhere in

Europe and perhaps even to parts of the United States. This is a sobering thought--one that Israel appears to be taking increasingly seriously in the wake of the Goldstone Report.

Still, there is no reason to assume that BDS cannot be successfully contained, if not fully defeated. Advances in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would certainly help, but even absent this, there is no reason for Israel and its supporters to be pessimistic. In the wake of the rise of Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah and the advent of homegrown Islamist terrorism in the UK, there are many--especially on the center-right and the Blairite center Left, who view Israel as an ally fighting a common enemy. Moreover, even on the liberal Left, which is more critical of Israel, the positive reception of arguments deployed by the anti-boycott campaign demonstrates that it is possible to maintain a distinction between criticism and delegitimization.

**Dr Jonathan Rynhold, Research Associate at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies and Senior lecturer in the Department of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University.*