

BRICUP Newsletter 76

BRICUP

British Committee for the
Universities of Palestine

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Behind the scenes at the Leeds academic boycott debate

The [debate](#) on the academic boycott of Israel that took place at the University of Leeds was, I'm proud to say, a resounding success. Aside from attracting an audience of roughly 100 students, administrators, academics and community members, the event saw BRICUP members Sue Blackwell and Jonathan Rosenhead convince a third of those who initially voted against the motion that, in the words of the motion, 'UK academics should join the movement for academic boycott by refusing to engage with Israeli academic institutions until Israel ends the occupation and abides by international law.'

As one of the core organizers – along with Professor James Dickins of Leeds – I've written

up my initial reflections on the debate [elsewhere](#). But as one of the first debates of its kind to take place in the UK, reflection on the problems and points of potential of this event can help us move forward more smoothly (hopefully) in the organizing of similar debates. While Monica Wusteman provided a fantastic article detailing the arguments of Jonathan, Sue and the two opposing debaters (Robert Fine of Warwick and Hugh Hubbard of Leeds) in April's BRICUP newsletter, I want to focus here on the difficulties that James and I encountered within our academic environment as we went about organizing this debate.

Initially, and to our naïve surprise, the debate was held up because we had trouble finding scholars willing and able to oppose the motion. Indeed, this was the most enduring problem in getting the debate off the ground. We aimed to attract Leeds-based debaters – and were lucky when Hugh Hubbard got in touch with us after hearing about the debate through our local UCU branch – but all of the individuals we reached out to in Leeds declined. Most of those who teach modules on the history and politics of Palestine/Israel were approached, including Pears Lecturer in Israel and Middle Eastern Studies in the School of Politics and International Studies, Alan Craig.

Though these declines were often curt and perfunctory, they also demonstrated a serious lack of engagement or thought with regard to the [PACBI call](#). One academic, for instance, who told me that he boycotts 'specific Israeli individuals, firms and governmental institutions', also indicated that part of the 'serious problem' with the academic boycott is that it 'seeks to boycott' individuals. When we got a chance to chat in

person sometime after this, I let him know that the PACBI was clear in its call for an institutional boycott. I was told that this was beside the point; the more important point, he said, was that it was unfair for academics to boycott Israel academia 'rather than any others in the world'.

This deflection and lack of engagement is, of course, unsurprising and is in fact further evidence of the need for additional debates and events on the academic boycott of Israel. And yet, that some scholars on Palestine/Israel seemingly understand so little about the PACBI call or the BDS movement more generally suggests not only a quite wilful level of ignorance, it also provides a telling sign of the picture of BDS and Palestinian resistance that lecturers are providing in the UK. Modules on Palestine/Israel, as we're already aware, often beget frustrations in the midst of twisted or mis-information. (It was only a few months ago that a student on a module in Leeds interrupted the lecturer when he pronounced that Israel had no laws that amounted to ethnic/racial discrimination; afterwards, the lecturer informed her that she had been rude and out of order.) However, what I've been thinking quite hard about since the debate is how, if at all, we can work to combat what in the end is a willful misunderstanding of BDS and the PACBI call that will be, and is, being fostered in lectures across the UK. What seems clear to me is that we, as academics, must continuously work with and alongside students as we build the movement for academic boycott in the UK. I think we did this quite well in Leeds, but in reality, such cooperation was born more out of the need for organizational sponsorship than strategy.

Indeed, much more predictably, a key barrier in arranging this debate was in locating a willing and able sponsor. Time and again, James and I approached a department or organization about sponsoring the event, received a warm and positive initial response, and then (often after some time) were told that sponsorship wasn't in fact possible. Particularly frustrating were the responses of UCU and the Leeds University Students Union. (I'll save a discussion about the latter for a future, fuller article.)

We approached our local UCU branch after one of our home departments indicated that they supported our effort but did not want to be seen 'officially' arguing in support of boycott; thus,

they suggested we ask UCU and the students' union. So, when we approached our local branch in late October, there was some anticipation over 'controversy', but, auspiciously, we were told that the Leeds branch could try to find an alternative if 'official' sponsorship didn't seem possible. When we heard from Leeds UCU in December that debate sponsorship had been raised at committee, we were told that 'the mood seemed generally positive' but that they wanted to 'wait to hear who the other speakers are' – those opposing the motion at the debate – before they committed. (It was around that time and through the local UCU branch that Hugh heard of the debate and offered to participate.)

It was only a few days after Robert decided to join the debate panel as the other oppose – at the tail end of January – that we got back in touch with UCU to let them know the full slate of debaters. And it was only a few days after that that we opened our emails to a terse reply: 'I'm afraid that at last Tuesday's Committee meeting it was decided not to support this debate. I can't say any more than that as unfortunately I could not attend.' After some probing, we found out that those at the meeting only discussed the issue in the hurried final minutes of the meeting. Apparently, someone quickly pointed out that the 'issue' had been divisive in the past and that sponsoring the debate might hinder the branch's attempts to build unity with regards to the pay campaign. No vote was taken, and evidently, it wasn't clear to those involved that the discussion could essentially close down the debate.

As Jonathan indicated at the time, those of us organizing the event disadvantaged ourselves and the debate by not attending the meeting ourselves in order to advocate for the debate and UCU sponsorship. Perhaps this should have been obvious at the time, but we certainly were lulled into a false sense of security given the initial (and, ostensibly, ongoing) enthusiasm for the debate. It was also unclear to both of us organizers and, it seems, those UCU members at the meeting, how and when UCU sponsorship would be decided upon. Ultimately, we should have sought greater clarity around process, decision-making, stipulations, etc., from as early-on as possible, regardless of the level of encouragement and enthusiasm our event seemed to generate.

However, and perhaps this was the most powerful lesson for me, it wasn't that the eagerness we

encountered was in fact a clear sign of a department or group's willingness to sponsor the debate, even if there were some individuals who clearly supported the debate. The initial enthusiasm in fact worked to eclipse what in hindsight seems clear – that sponsoring the debate, for most organizations or departments, is a non-starter; it was never going to happen. This is not to say that some individuals don't or wouldn't sincerely push their organizations to sponsor such an event, but it is to point out, as Les Levidow pointed out to me, asking for sponsorship from organizations on these events forces academics to justify their positions. It forces questions over why some 'controversial' events or topics are 'allowed' and some are not, why some issues around academic freedom are 'safe' or fine to discuss and others are not. What I have learned though is that many academic groups or organizations will provide initial responses veneered in enthusiasm in order to avoid having to justify or explain their stances on these issues.

Les reminded me that the 'bad' aspects of these events can become opportunities for pushing further, and I think that's right. So aside from pushing ourselves to work more intently with students, I think that in future debates we should push beyond the veneers of seemingly keen organizations and groups to make sure that we're not banking on support that won't materialize.

Say Burgin

The PACBI column

Criteria for choosing the optimal BDS target

As the BDS movement continues to grow at a fast pace, many activists around the world, including in Palestine, often wonder what institution or corporation to target and how. Whether it is an academic, cultural, economic, sports or other BDS campaign, selecting the boycott or divestment target is often not as straightforward as many may think, particularly if the overall BDS strategy of mainstreaming is taken into consideration. Here we focus on cultural and academic boycott targets specifically.

Every Israeli academic and cultural institution -- and we regard choirs, orchestras and dance groups as institutions -- is complicit in Israel's regime of occupation, settler colonialism and apartheid

unless they publicly denounce Israel's violations of international law and accept the full and equal rights of Palestinians. According to the guidelines for the international boycott of Israel [1] adopted by Palestinian civil society, the mere fact that an Israeli institution receives state funding is not a sufficient condition for calling for a boycott against it. But receiving state funding certainly makes it more incumbent upon the institution in question to take a public stand against the state's regime of oppression against the Palestinian people.

As in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, an institution cannot claim to be "above" politics [2] simply because it produces art or science. The institution is complicit and therefore subject to the boycott so long as it benefits from the unjust order that exists and chooses to remain silent about it. If an international forum invites such a complicit institution, it in turn becomes complicit and boycottable.

However, the BDS movement, and PACBI as part of it, does not actually boycott every boycottable event, product or institution, as that would make it impossible to achieve concrete results. To be strategic, we carefully select our targets and how we intervene in each case. If a demonstration can win us more enemies than friends, we skip it. If a dignified "artistic" protest works better, then we do it. An example of the latter is the brilliant musical disruption, including a soprano number, by our British partners against the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra in London in 2011, part of which was aired on BBC before the station realized what was happening[3]. If only a statement is deemed best, we issue it. If ignoring the boycottable event altogether and focusing instead on more important targets helps us raise more awareness and garner more support in the general public, then we do that. After all, BDS is all about movement building from the grassroots up.

Regardless of the tactics of intervention, to be strategically worthy, the process of selecting a BDS target would benefit from considering the following three criteria:

- 1) The level of complicity involved: The deeper the complicity, the easier it is to mobilize support for BDS action against any given target. For example, the fact that Tel Aviv and Technion Universities are deeply involved in developing military products and doctrines that are used by

Israel in its perpetration of war crimes against Palestinian and Lebanese civilians makes the two institutions perfect BDS targets.

2) The potential for forming a broad, cross-movement coalition against the target: A boycott of security giant G4S, for instance, makes much more sense than boycotting a company that only infringes on Palestinian rights, as G4S infringes on immigrants' rights, is deeply involved in the privatization of vital public services in many countries, etc., making it an ideal target that encourages the formation of a wide coalition against (unions, anti-privatization groups, artists, asylum seekers' advocacy networks, among others).

3) Possibility of success: Even if the above two conditions are met, we do not launch a campaign against a target unless we have a reasonable chance of success. Success, at times, merely means reaching a wide mainstream audience and winning their support, rather than actually succeeding in cancelling an event, convincing a supermarket to stop buying from some company or another involved in the Israeli occupation and apartheid, or having an exchange program with an Israeli university cancelled.

But symbolic victories alone are not sufficient. We are involved in BDS to achieve Palestinian rights, ultimately, and not to make points and feel good about symbolic gestures alone. Only through sustained, cumulative, growing and mainstreaming successes can BDS achieve its objectives—freedom, justice and equality.

[1] Academic boycott guidelines:
<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108>
Cultural boycott guidelines:
<http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1047>
[2] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=2010>
[3]
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/03/world/europe/03london.html?pagewanted=all>

PACBI

Academics for Palestine (Ireland)

As reported in a previous BRICUP newsletter, academics for Palestine (AfP) is an all-island body of academics working to implement the academic boycott of Israel in Irish third level

institutions. In a previous BRICUP newsletter we have already reported on the launch of AfP, in February in Belfast and Dublin. The core work of AfP is campaigning through meetings in Irish universities and colleges and in the media. We also give support to student bodies on Palestine and the boycott. In debates at University College Cork and the National University of Ireland, Galway, there were big majorities in favour of the academic boycott. The success of these events and the attention in the media engendered by our activities have of course led to a backlash from the Israeli embassy and some pro-Zionist individuals. Indeed an anti-boycott motion is being raised at the annual congress of the Irish Federation of University Teachers on 10 May. AfP will be working for the defeat of that motion and we will report on that in the next edition of this newsletter. AfP operated a stand and leafleted at the annual conference of the Teachers Union of Ireland, gaining 20 additional signatories for our boycott pledge. Many of the TUI's members are third level academics. The TUI last year adopted the policy of the academic boycott of Israel. This was largely through the impact made by AfP members of TUI.

We now have over 170 academic signatories to our academic boycott pledge. We have also produced a 24-page booklet 'Academia Against Apartheid: The case for an academic boycott of Israel'. The booklet addresses most reasons for the academic boycott and answers all the arguments put by opponents. This will be useful, not only for academics in Ireland, but also elsewhere. To that purpose BRICUP j cu'r qugf an [electronic copy of the booklet qp"qwt y gdukg0](#) Hard copies will be available from AfP member Peter Collins at the Manchester Congress of UCU later this month. AfP is currently providing support to those proposing a motion, at the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland annual conference, on 9 May, to suspend the Israeli Association of United Architects from the International Union of Architects. Readers will remember that a similar motion was recently adopted at the Royal Institute of British Architects.

As, in many respects, AfP and BRICUP are working on similar campaigns, we hope to collaborate more closely in the future. AfP member Elaine Bradley will be attending the next committee meeting of BRICUP. On the agenda will be a discussion of how to expose EU research funding to universities which collaborate with the Israeli research institutions and companies,

particularly in the security, aerospace technology and nuclear categories. We urgently need to highlight European involvement in the murkier aspects of the Israeli armaments industry, such as drones and other anti-human weapons, tested in attacks on the so-called 'Gaza lab.' Also, both our organisations will be increasing pressure on our governments not to award contracts to G4S, the company that keeps Palestinian prisoners in inhumane conditions.

In the autumn AFP hopes to welcome Ilan Pappé and Ghada Karmi as main speakers to a college debate on the boycott.

Note added in proof by the author "The "Anti boycott motion at the Irish Federation of University Teachers annual congress was overwhelmingly defeated" on May 9th 2014.

Peter Collins

Student protests at the Hebrew University

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, like all other Israeli universities, makes for a very compelling case of boycott against its complicity in Israeli crimes. There are many examples of such a complicity as well as of active forms of participation in the state's policies of occupation and apartheid: two of its three campuses in occupied Jerusalem are situated on ethnically cleansed lands while never acknowledging their past; it harbors a military base in one of them while in the other it runs a military program under the auspices of the faculty of medicine; it receives research funding from the ministry of defense and much more.

The two elite military-university programs, Tzameret for medical training and Talpiot for the natural sciences, are regarded as great success stories which are used by the Hebrew University to boast about its ever increasing ties with the medical corps, the air force and the Ministry of Defense. Consequently, agreements between them are being signed and upgraded, including the founding of a joint research institute of military medicine which was inaugurated by the Chief of Staff in 2013 [1].

However, in recent weeks the university had demonstrated that it is not only a tool of the state's oppressive policies, it had actually incorporated such policies to be employed in-

house, against its own students of Palestinian descent.

Majd Hamdan is a student of computer science and secretary of the Balad party affiliated student group. He was arrested and expelled for ten days along with two fellow students, Farah Baiadisy and Khalil Gharra, for expressing their opposition to a recent attempt by Israel to conscript its Christian-Palestinian citizens into the army. Hamdan notes that about 20 students who demonstrated inside the campus were met with extreme force by university security guards, the police and the border police, who were carrying guns and armed with live ammunition. Following the ensuing arrests, the students released a statement against the university's role in repression while also expressing their implicit support of the academic boycott. He explains that the university is very susceptible to such threats and that only recently a six-month suspension of their political student group was ended due to a clear threat of supporting the academic boycott. [2]

The statement reads:

Dear students,

We have organized, as student movements in the Hebrew University, a demonstration opposing the Israeli regime's plans to erase our collective Arab identity and the recent demands to recruit the Christian Arab youth in the occupation army. Our demonstration was brutally suppressed by the University's security force in cooperation with the Israeli police forces that attacked the students and arrested three of them (Farah Baiadisy, Khalil Gharra and Majd Hamdan), who got released later that day.

We condemn the brutality of the University's security forces, as well as the continuous cooperation between the University's administration and the Israeli police, as they have previously allowed the police forces to enter the student dormitory to arrest a few students; in addition to assisting the police forces in the suppression of the student demonstrations against the siege on Gaza and during the Palestinian prisoner's hunger strike.

The Hebrew University is a kernel part of the colonial regime, as it reflects the Israeli

institution's racist policies toward the Arab students; attempting to erase our collective Arab identity and silencing us. The academic boycott is a direct result of the University's racist policies toward its students. What has occurred today is a serious escalation that will not be taken lightly. The University did not stop at that, for it has illegally frozen the activity of two Arab student movements, NDA and "Ilam", under racist and false pretensions.

We consider the constant arrests done by the police forces in cooperation with the University's security forces as futile attempts to isolate us from our Palestinian nation and to silence us. These attempts will not deter us nor frighten us; rather, they will motivate and encourage us in continuing our political struggle within and without the University campus. We will continue in our struggle against the recruitment scheme.

We invite you to join us in our demonstration that will be held tomorrow 30.4.2014 at 14:00 in Mount Scopus campus (near the fountain) to raise our voices against the University's policies in and the occupation state's attempts to force military recruitment on the Christian Arabs.

The Arab movements in the Hebrew University 29.4.2014. Occupied Jerusalem

The next day, a silent vigil of around 150 students was met by even greater repression on behalf of the university, when its security personnel were now acting undercover, mimicking the methods employed by such undercover units who regularly act in the occupied West Bank. These undercovers have turned violent on cue against the silent protesters.

In the lead-up to an even greater show of solidarity, coming from various groups of students and teachers, Palestinians and ethnic-Jews alike, the next public statement by the Arab students had become more explicit in its support of the boycott:

Freedom of speech and freedom to protest are basic human rights which are not open for discussion or negotiations, especially under the Israeli Universities' racist policies (the Hebrew University in specific), where values of democracy and liberality are studied inside the halls; but where demonstrations organized by Arab students are constantly being suppressed.

Universities are considered the largest space where political activity can take place; but in Jerusalem, the university's administration does not only prevent this space from its students, but it also fights any attempt done outside of it (protests, spreading out flyers...). We will also be addressing the BDS movements around the world to help expose the University's policies.

This does not mean that liberal-Zionists who attended the demonstration are supportive of BDS. They have notoriously requested their Arab peers in the past to "choose your struggle in a way that will allow us to support you", ie. refrain from challenging Zionism or the ethnic-supremacist character of the state. Yet, given the brutality employed and the sheer racism expressed by the university, it has managed to join such forces that otherwise would not be seen under the same banner.

Israeli campuses, as opposed to many universities around the world, are not a hub for social struggles but quite the opposite. Hamdan claims that even the most trivial political activity such as leafleting, which is certainly permitted outside the university quarters, is being met with a political filter inside. The Zionist groups are free to spread their racist politics on campus as they see fit, while against the Arab students there is a clear attempt at silencing and hindering their activity. "We will not be deterred by it and will carry on in our struggle, we will continue to speak up against the scheme to enlist Arab youths into the Israeli army", he says.

The BDS campaign has proven that it is not only the most elementary step to be taken by those who choose equality over supremacy, or freedom over oppression, it is also the most effective and empowering tool for those who are voiceless or have been quashed by Zionism. From within his prison cell, Mumia Abu-Jamal, also known as the voice of the voiceless, has expressed it well by saying that: "The state would rather give me an uzi than a microphone" - Lets be that microphone for change!

Ronnie Barkan

Co-founder of 'Boycott from within'

Video links

- 1] <http://youtu.be/wCgMgjJwxqs>
- 2] <http://youtu.be/i1PYxFbR5Rw>

Haifa University sets up for-credit course in lying

Hasbara courses are [not unusual in Israeli universities](#) but previously they have been short courses outside the main programme. Now Haifa University has crossed another red line and launched, as a four credit course, ‘Ambassadors Online: Volunteering, Zionism, Digital Diplomacy’, to be offered by the University’s Department of Multi-Disciplinary Studies to prepare students to be unofficial “ambassadors” for Israel on the Internet.

The lack of the critical approach to be expected of any legitimate university programme is apparent from the endorsements on the [programme’s home page](#) which include such propaganda organisations as StandWithUs and Birthright Israel and also the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy & Diaspora Affairs.

A flavour of the programme can be seen in the [projects they display](#) from the previous short courses. Mostly they are self-indulgent celebrations of ‘Brand Israel’, no mention here of occupation, torture or the Apartheid Wall which disfigure the country. Others are tendentious defences of Israeli policies or attacks on critics of the state inside or outside Israel. [One featured piece](#) correctly notes, ‘This is why the darkest regimes in the history of mankind censured culture and academy in their countries and used these assets for their own needs’; however, it then continues ‘Fortunately, things are different in Israel’. No recognition of the nature of the programme they are enrolled on there: a fine example of Stan Cohen’s States of Denial.

The University’s press release announcing the programme is unashamedly entitled [University of Haifa’s ‘Cyber Warriors’ will help fight the delegitimization of Israel using new media](#) without noticing that it is ventures such as this that promote the self- delegitimization of the country.

In mounting this programme Haifa University further undermines those arguments against the Academic Boycott based on the claims that Israeli universities are independent of the state.

Mike Cushman

Notices

BRICUP is the **British Committee for the Universities of Palestine**.

We are always willing to help provide speakers for meetings. All such requests and any comments or suggestions concerning this Newsletter are welcome.

Email them to: newsletter@bricup.org.uk

Letters to the Editor

Please note that we do have a “Letters to the Editor” facility. We urge you to use it. It provides an opportunity for valuable input from our supporters and gives you the opportunity to contribute to the debate and development of the campaign. Please send letters to arrive on or before the first day of each month for consideration for that month’s newsletter. Aim not to exceed 250 words if possible. Letters and comments should also be sent to newsletter@bricup.org.uk

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BRICUP needs your financial support.

Arranging meetings and lobbying activities are expensive. We need funds to support visiting speakers, book rooms for public meetings, print leaflets and pay the whole range of expenses that a busy campaign demands.

Please do consider making a donation .

One-off donations may be made by sending a cheque to the Treasurer, at BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London, WC1N 3XX, UK or by making a bank transfer to BRICUP at Sort Code 08-92-99

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