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Understanding the rise of 'Israel studies'

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Writing in her own capacity*

If Israel/Palestine is, on one level, a battle of ideas, few arenas play host to this battle more frequently than universities. As Ilan Pappé has documented, policing of the academy occurs even in Israel itself, where the 'post-Zionist' turn of the 1990s was largely stamped out and the hegemony of Zionism ensured by a combination of action from hard line civil society groups like Im Tirzu

and other actors who sought to change the institutional landscape of higher education.

For example, Uriel Reichman, a founder of the International Disciplinary Centre (IDC) Herzliya, established in 1994, said the institute was intended to "change the academic agenda of the country". Meanwhile the Shalem Centre, also founded in the mid-1990s went on to establish Shalem College, which provost Yoram Hazony explained the necessity for in similar and urgent terms, stating: "if my university is not established...Zionism will have no future."

This is the context for the emergence of 'Israel studies' as an academic discipline, which first appeared in the U.S. in 1998. Dire warnings had also been issued by senior American scholars like Jehuda Reinharz of Brandeis, about the way young Americans were coming to view Israel, partly, he felt because of the longstanding hostility towards the country in many Middle East studies departments'. In turn, longstanding Zionist hostility towards these departments has been [sustained](#).

Israel studies has been consciously fostered in the UK since around the turn of the millennium, one of the first posts being created at the University of Oxford after a gift from an anonymous donor in 2002. Notably, external donors have played a highly significant role in the expansion of the subject. And, as the March 2012 BRICUP briefing '[Universities rebranding Israel's image: hasbara posts in Israel studies threaten academic integrity](#)' observed, the individuals and foundations behind a flurry of donations creating chairs of Israel studies (including at Sussex, SOAS, Leeds, Oxford and Manchester) tend to have demonstrable links to pro-Israel activism.

Furthermore, key figures such as Sussex donor Lord Weidenfeld had openly stated that he sees such courses as “vital in the fight against anti-Zionism”. It is legitimate, therefore, to question the extent to which there was an academic need for such positions versus a politically motivated desire to create them on the part of external donors, in order to normalise Israel and create ‘facts on the ground’ to undermine the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

During my doctoral research into the pro-Israel movement’s response BDS, I have looked at the university sphere among other arenas. I have not conducted content analysis on the reading lists or curricula of Israel studies courses. Nor have I sought to assess the ‘impact’ on learners. Instead, I used the Freedom of Information Act to gather internal documents about the processes and mechanisms involved in the establishment of these Israel studies posts.

From these documents, I gleaned information pertaining to some of the important questions raised in a recent PACBI briefing [‘Interrogating Israel Studies in the Academy: a Call to Action’](#). These include the role of the donors and whether they had a say in appointment process, for example by suggesting names for the post or the appointment committee.

I found that in two cases, donors did suggest names: either of academics to be considered for the post or to sit on the appointments committee. In two other cases donors knew which academics would take up the post (in one case a specific academic was named in the deed of gift, in another an agreement was renewed in the knowledge that the incumbent academic would continue in the post).

In some cases vice chancellors not only sat on the appointment committees but met privately with donors to thank them for their donations – often hoping to build relationships with and soliciting further funding at the same time, leaving them vulnerable to influence. One indicator of donor influence is the fact that, in two cases, although universities were initially reluctant to name the chairs of Israel studies according to the wishes of donors, they eventually agreed.

But the documents also highlighted the fact that the establishment of these posts was not simply a case of donors somehow imposing their will on universities from outside; in fact in several cases ‘entrepreneurial academics’ seem to have been the ones who initiated the projects, met with donors and championed collaboration. Often,

other staff members raised concerns but consultation was limited.

Discourses of academic ‘objectivity’ are sometimes deployed by universities to counter criticisms. But Israel studies academics, like all scholars today, are keen to show policy impact. However, it would be highly reductionist to present these courses and posts as mere indoctrination or *hasbara* - and remiss to ignore the centres for Palestine studies that exist at SOAS and Exeter (though, like the conflict itself, these two counter-examples are on the weaker side of an asymmetric balance of powers).

However, in the context of concerns about the so-called ‘anti-Israel’ atmosphere on many college campuses, the rise of Israel studies does seem to be, in part at least, one prong of a long term strategic response. In donors minds’ at least, it is a way to facilitate a better ‘understanding’ (as they see it) of Israel and the political ramifications of such an understanding are instrumental not incidental. Whether this will be a successful strategy or not remains to be seen.

British ban on Gaza clinicians.

BMJ 2015;351:h 6157

Palestinian campaigners in the United Kingdom are considering legal action after three doctors were refused entry to attend a conference.

The three doctors (and a nurse and a psychologist) were due to attend a conference on trauma and resilience at Kingston University, southwest London, on 14 and 15 November but had their visa applications turned down by the Home Office.

The three family doctors are employed by the Palestinian Ministry of Health and have been named as Hasnaa Al Sourani, Head of the department of non-communicable diseases, Amal Shaat, and Rula Al Helo.

The doctors were due to give papers at the conference, which is focussing on trauma and resilience in the context of political violence.

Mohamed Altawil, director of the Palestine Trauma Centre UK and one of the organisers of the conference, said that any successful legal outcome would not now help the barred conference delegates but would send a message to

the UK government that it should not prevent ordinary Palestinians from entering the country.

“This is for others who might want to come to the UK. This is a human rights issue and the [visa refusal] has come as a shock to people in Palestine wanting to come here,” he said.

Mohammed Mukhaimar, a psychologist and member of the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network, said that the UK authorities were concerned that the three doctors, who had World Health Organization sponsorship to attend the conference, would not want to return home because of the socioeconomic situation in Palestine.

“It’s a political decision,” said Mukhaimar. “The British government regards the West Bank as a troubled area, and this decision is based on assumptions rather than any fact.” He said the doctors were well established and were unlikely to want to flee their homeland. He added that Palestinians felt trapped in their country.

“This was a crushing decision. Being able to leave Gaza has a huge psychological meaning. It would have given [the delegates] a connection to the world and enabled them to tell people about their work on the front line,” he said.

A video recording of the doctors’ presentation will be shown at the conference, said Mukhaimar. “But the point was that they were coming to the conference to connect with and meet other professionals,” he said.

Mukhaimar and other members of the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network have organised a petition, and in a letter to the *Independent* newspaper they wrote that the decision has detrimental implications for children and families in Palestine “whose suffering under these unconscionable circumstances it is difficult for us to appreciate.”

[A group of British Academics, the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine, has also written to the UK Home Secretary, Teresa May, in protest. Their letter said that the Israeli authorities “frequently obstruct the movement of Palestinian academics” wishing to travel abroad. The academics added, “We are extremely disturbed to find that the Home Office is aggravating the difficulties that our Palestinian colleagues regularly encounter under Israeli occupation. We urge you as a matter of urgency, to reverse the decision of your officials and enable the five invitees to attend the conference.”](#)

A spokesman from Kingston University said that the conference would go ahead despite the bans

Notes

1] Article written by Anne Gulland for the British Medical Journal.

2] Published on 13/11/2015

3] Cited as BMJ 2015;351:h 6157

UAB senate urges rector to back academic boycott against Israel

Original article in La Directa:

The university community of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) is the first in Spain to pass a motion supporting Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. However this decision is not binding on the leadership of the university. During the last year, at the Bellaterra campus, various events have been organised to spread awareness about the struggle of the Palestinian people.

The BDS campaign at the UAB has taken a year to achieve one of its main aims - for the senate to adopt a motion supporting academic BDS against Israel. The senate is the highest representative of the university community, debating general university policy, reviewing the actions of university leaders and reporting to other organs of university government. In last Thursday's session, led by Rector Ferran Sancho, members of Crida for UAB, an umbrella group for students of different faculties, put down a motion on behalf of UAB BDS. The motion was voted on and passed. The university community calls on the UAB leadership to declare the UAB “free from Apartheid” until Israel “respects human rights and complies with international law”. In practical terms, this means that the university community has called on the UAB leadership to declare the UAB “free from Apartheid” and to break all links with “Israeli institutions which are directly or indirectly involved in the occupation of Palestine” until Israel “respects human rights and complies with international law”.

The UAB BDS group has welcomed this victory and adds, “We are very proud of the enthusiasm and energy devoted to this cause”. Chaimae, a member of the UAB BDS group, said that they

have stepped up their campaign among teachers, researchers and students from different faculties. They have organised on-campus awareness activities, such as talks and a concert to commemorate Nakba Day. “Eventually,” Chaimae says, “we achieved enough support to table this issue in university representative bodies.” Fátima, a pro-Palestinian activist, emphasises that this is only the start. She believes that passing the motion will “create pressure for BDS to be applied” and, if it is not applied, it will at least highlight “the rector’s disinterest in the stance taken by the university community”.

The struggle for an academic boycott: The struggle at the UAB is not the first academic boycott campaign in Catalonia. Over the last two years the [Complicitats que maten](#) (Complicities that kill) campaign has called on the University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC) to rescind its agreements with Israeli institutions and has gathered 400 individual and 67 collective endorsements. On 12 November 2013, UVic-UCC announced the signing of collaboration agreements with Israeli institutions. UVic-UCC Rector Jordi Montaña had travelled with the delegation of the president of the Generalitat of Catalonia government, Artur Mas, on an official trip to Israel. He came back with agreements with the University of Haifa and Rambam Health Care Campus to promote mobility programmes for teachers, researchers and students, and to establish inter-university undergraduate and master’s degrees. The University of Haifa sponsors an academic programme that trains army intelligence officers at a military centre on the university campus itself. The “Complicitats que maten” campaign has condemned University of Haifa sponsorship of training of future intelligence officers at a military centre on the university campus itself. Furthermore, students who have served in the army have preference on accommodation lists, which according to activists “is discriminatory towards Palestinian Arab students”.

The victory in the UAB senate vote is a great step forward in this struggle, since this is the first university in Spain to declare support across campus for an academic boycott. Previously, units in other universities had come out in favour of the cause, such as the Geography and History Faculty of the University of Valencia, the Department of Sociology of the University of La Laguna and the Department of Social Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Madrid, among others.

According to the [Academic BDS for Palestine](#) group, more than 1,300 university teachers and researchers have endorsed this initiative, which calls for solidarity and involvement of the international community to “oblige Israel to comply with currently applicable law and desist from decades of oppression and repression in Palestine”.

Notes

- 1] Article by David Bou 21/12/2015
- 2] Original article in La Directa: <https://directa.cat/actualitat/claustre-de-uab-insta-rectorat-aplicar-boicot-academic-israel>

Brazil rejects Israeli Ambassador

Issued by BDS South Africa .

Brazil has objected to Israel's appointment of Israeli Ambassador Dani Dayan because of his former role as the head of an Israeli settler movement in the occupied Palestinian West Bank and his continued residence in an Israeli settlement. Israel’s settlements are considered illegal under international law.

In response, Israel has threatened Brazil that it will downgrade diplomatic relations unless it accepts Dayan, an Israeli settler, as its ambassador. Relations between the two countries have been tense since 2010. They soured further last year when Brazil withdrew its ambassador from Israel in diplomatic protest against what it called the "disproportionate use of force" by Israel in its attacks on the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

Earlier this month, the leadership of BDS South Africa (BDS SA) held a successful bilateral meeting with Pedro Charbel, the Latin America BDS representative and coordinator. BDS SA shared South African BDS successes, victories and campaigns. In addition, Charbel briefed BDS SA on BDS developments and successes in Brazil and Latin America.

Some of the latest BDS boycott of Israel victories and successes in Latin America include:-

1. The Brazilian province of Rio Grande do Sul, in December 2014, cancelling its collaboration with the Israeli military company Elbit Systems.

2. Argentinian authorities in Buenos Aires suspending, since March 2014, a \$170 million water treatment deal with the controversial Israeli state water company, Mekorot.

3. In October 2015 four Colombian film festivals joining the cultural boycott against Israel.

4. The largest trade union in Uruguay (PIT-CNT), two major Argentinian trade unions, and Brazil's largest trade union (CUT) all endorsing the BDS boycott of Israel and calling for the regional economic bloc, Mercosur, to end its Free Trade Agreement with Israel.

5. The Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) endorsing the academic boycott of Israel and subsequently withdrawing its support from university events sponsored by the Israeli Embassy.

6. Latin America's largest university, the University of São Paulo (USP) ending its partnership with Israel's Ariel University, preceded by its students' higher representative congress endorsing the BDS boycott of Israel. Similar academic boycott of Israel endorsements in Argentina by over 100 faculty members, associations and Departmental Boards.

Inspired by the successful boycott against Apartheid South Africa, in 2005 Palestinian civil society issued a call for boycotts, divestments and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it meets its international law obligations. Today the BDS movement is active on various continents and countries. A recent United Nations report [found](#) that between 2014 and 2015 Israel lost 46% in Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) due to, amongst other things, international boycotts.

BDS South Africa, as a South African partner of the international Palestinian BDS movement, is motivated and encouraged by developments in Latin America and elsewhere across the [globe](#).

Notes:

1] 30/12/2015

2] Issued by Kwara Kekana on behalf of *BDS SOUTH AFRICA*.

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.

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